

DOLPO

THE WORLD BEHIND THE HIMALAYAS



Karna Sakya

D O L P O

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KARNA SAKYA



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*To my most precious
Lindy*

FOREWORD

Dolpo has highlighted Karna's thoughts for years. He commenced lots of trekking in the remote areas of the Himalayas and could never begin or conclude his lively conversation without mentioning the name of Dolpo. So once I commented, "you are a Dolpoholic". He grinned. I asked him seriously "why don't you write about it ?" Surprisingly after so many years, the idea suddenly struck him. He questioned "wouldn't it be too late to write a book on a subject which is more than six years old ?" I encouraged him "no, adventure is a timeless story." I insisted "the years of Dolpo never pass with man made calenders, they run with nature. So Dolpo is always new, infinite and eternal."

Determination filled up in us; we flew to Darjeeling, India's king of the mountain resorts; secluded ourself from Karna's business and social commitments in a comfortable hut, from where we could view the multiple folds of mountains and through which he could periscope his memories of the mountain life.

He closed his eyes. I sat next to him with pen and paper. The vivid memories of Dolpo flashed back and enveloped him. His mind walked back every step of the trail, met all his companions, climbed the rugged mountains up and down. The rolling Dolpo enthroned over the vast meadows dotted with colourful wild flowers appeared in his third eye. The flow of his memories came out in words. I jotted them down and very soon the first draft of the book was ready. After coming back to Kathmandu I tried to edit, but there was not much to change, I like Karna's expression and his style.

Although I have never been to Dolpo, nor would I ever dare go, I saw it through his eyes and sensed its animation through his mind and emotion. It became very familiar to me and it is most beautiful; and I imagine it must be a heaven if there is one.

Dr. Linda Diane Griffith.

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INTRODUCTION

“From my youth upwards my spirit walked not with the soul of men... my griefs, my passions and my powers made me a stranger... my joy was in the wilderness.”

Lord Byron

Many people throughout the world, although having some knowledge of Nepal, often think that the people of this country are highlanders for whom trekking, climbing, and mountaineering are parts of their daily lives. Unless and until they visit this country they have only a vague idea as to the life and social structure of the average Nepali in whose life they think the mountains must surely be an important attraction. I realized this during an incident which happened to me in Australia. An aborigine proudly pointed out Mt. Kosciuski, 7,000 feet, the highest mountain on the Australian continent. An Australian in the group mentioned that I was from Nepal, the land of the Himalayas, where the world's highest mountains abound, and where there were many villages above 7,000 feet. Another member of the group said that I would be able to climb Mt. Kosciuski quite easily, not realizing that it would be as hard for me as it would be for him.

I recall a similar incident when I was a forestry student. My college at Dehradun (in India), organized an excursion to study alpine vegetation, during which we had to climb Rotang Pass, between 14,000– 15,000 feet, in Manali valley of the Himachal Pradesh of North India. After a hard climb, I was the third person to reach the pass, and I was so happy, expecting appreciation from my colleagues and professors because of my energetic efforts. But my credit was lost when someone remarked, “Oh, but he's from the mountain country”, little realizing that one of my Nepali colleagues had

dropped out and returned to the camp without reaching the pass.

Such are the incidents which I have experienced illustrating the misconception people have of the Nepalese, especially of those living in Kathmandu. They think many of the Nepalese are Sherpas, and can climb the mountains as easily as mountain goats. But this is not true.

Until I was twenty-three, I had lived all my life in Kathmandu, hardly ever going out, except of course to travel in India. As far as I could remember, none of my relatives had ever climbed or trekked up in the mountains, nor had they any idea of what climbing entailed. I had never climbed at that time, and the highest I had been was up to Swayambhunath Temple, a hillock on the outskirts of Kathmandu. My only knowledge of the Himalayas was of the snow-capped peaks I could see in the distance to the north of Kathmandu. And yet in this way, I was not exceptional; I was an average Nepali, for whom travelling to remote lands was a real challenge. None of my friends or relatives had any idea of the economic or physical handicaps in such isolated lands. Most Nepalese who are educated and financially comfortable prefer to spend their holidays in resort areas of India, and seldom make a plan to go trekking. Government officials are extremely reluctant to work in far off and remote areas, preferring to stay in Kathmandu.

After graduation from the Forestry School at Dehradun, I joined the Forestry Service in Nepal, and at first travelled mainly in the Terai region of south Nepal. Even in this department, few people made journeys to remote lands as forest management was concentrated mainly in the accessible Terai areas, and mountain forests were almost neglected because of their inaccessibility.

My first trek was to the Lambagar area. I accepted with both curiosity and fear of this ten day trek, which was to start from Jiri. I had to go with two experts from the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations who were both well experienced. But as this was my first trek I was nervous, and unsure of what sort of sleeping bag, food and so on, I should take. I was excited and curious, and spent a lot of the time poring over the trekking map. Having no knowledge of trekking, my mind was full of many questions such as, exactly how would it be to trek, how and where would one eat, where would we sleep, how tired would we become, and many more. Even map reading was a new subject for me.

This trek proved to be a rather bitter experience. I found it difficult to cope with the pain and tiredness of climbing up and down, but I returned having gained enough experience to know how to prepare for future treks. This trek stimulated in me a love of nature, but even on my return I was still afraid to go again, as I knew it was not easy. However, by now I was committed, and I knew I would make many more of these treks. I was then appointed as a wild life officer and travelled extensively to remote areas on official duty. I found each trek easier and more enjoyable.

During my treks and while in Kathmandu, I love to spend my time studying maps and imagining the country-side through them. Quite a few of the different areas, both in the lowlands and in the high mountains, were known to me, but whenever I looked at the huge blank space on the map in the mid north-west of the country, behind the great Himalayas, I always stopped to lose myself in wide-eyed open dreams. This is Dolpo, the most remote land of the country, where, on the map, the faintly traced trail follows along the closed contours of gorges, valleys and spurs of the great himalayan range; then the trail traverses the wide contour lines of the map. The altitude is so high, the

lowest point being 13,000 feet. Hence a barren, life-less zone can be anticipated.

I often thought of trekking to this area, but I always postponed it, as the trek would take at least two months, and require lots of preparation. It would be an exciting challenge, particularly as it is a little-known region of the country. A visit to Dolpo became essential for me to survey the wild life of Trans-Himalayan region. The more I studied and inquired about it, the more enthusiastic I became. I had the deep feeling that the call of the wilderness from Dolpo was inviting me and that I had to go, no matter how difficult it would be.



CHAPTER ONE

PREPARATION OF THE TREK

“The most interesting parts of a map are the blank places. They are the spots I might explore some day..I make imaginary use of them..”

Aldo Leopold

My long awaited dream of visiting Nepal's remotest land, Dolpo, was now becoming a reality. The Forestry Department, where I was appointed as a wild-life officer, accepted the application and gave the official order to visit this land with my counterpart, Mr. John Blower. John was engaged as a wild-life advisor from the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations and with whom I had trekked quite far, in different parts of the country. He was in his early fifties, and had tremendous energy. He had been working in different national parks of Africa for the last twenty years. With his incredible knowledge of practical forestry and nature, he taught me quite a lot

When I went to get the final travelling paper from the Chief Conservator's Office in the Singha Durbar Secretariat Building* all the forest officers were describing this region in their own ways from second and third-hand stories. But the stories were completely confusing and intermingled with others. When all

**Singha Durbar, a huge complex of all the secretariat offices of HMG of Nepal was the biggest such building in all Asia. It had couple of hundred rooms and dozens of courtyards. In the beginning of seventies it was burned down with only the facade remaining.*

the papers were sanctioned, I made a telephone call to John to tell him that I was ready to leave Kathmandu at any time. His gruff voice, clearly that of an older man, told me in his very British accent that he was thinking of including Dr. Bob Fleming, Jr. Bob is the country's foremost ornithologist, who spends his time studying the natural history of Nepal, and who is one of the most travelled persons of Nepal. Although his main field is bird study, he has a tremendous knowledge of every aspect of nature. I realized that our trip could be most valuable and useful, if it were composed of a forester, wild-life specialist, and an ornithologist.

At 5 o'clock, after getting all the official papers, I went down to John's home. We spread out all our maps on the floor in his beautiful drawing room. We studied the map of the area we would visit. After some time Bob Fleming Jr. appeared with his usual wide smile and clapped his hands together with enthusiasm. Together the three of us checked the trail on the map and talked about the journey we would make. We decided to fly from Kathmandu to Dhorpatan and to walk from there all the way up along the Suligad River, and then to come back to Dhorpatan via Mukat Himal, passing through Barabung Khola. In fact we later changed this route and returned to Pokhara via Jomosom. After taking some tea, we broke up our first meeting, agreeing to meet the next day in Bob's home at 5 o'clock to arrange all the gear and provisions.

I packed up all my trekking gear from previous treks. In fact, my equipment was not the best. The tent I had was mended in many places, the sleeping bags were of poor quality, and I didn't have a really good wind-breaker or down jacket. Although I realized that the forthcoming trek would take me to high altitudes and across difficult passes, I nevertheless kept my old gear, as what I really required was unlikely to be available in Kathmandu and if it were, it would be very expensive. But I consoled myself with the knowledge of how much better off I was with my bala-

clava cap, heavy sweater and warm pants than the poorly equipped Sherpas. I was most concerned about my footwear, for the best I could find in Kathmandu were high canvas boots. I had travelled quite a lot in these, but I knew that for this trek they were not good enough, as I would have to walk for a long time in permanent snow and under these conditions, there was a good possibility of getting frost-bite. I had tried hard to find better boots, but as everything I looked at was very heavy, I ended up discarding them all and taking the canvas boots after all. I tied up my sleeping bags, tent, five pairs of warm woollen pants, two heavy jumpers, one windbreaker jacket, several pairs of socks, shirts and undershirts in a piece of tarpaulin bedding. Altogether, I guessed it weighed about 65 lbs-enough for one porter.

After that I checked my camera, binoculars and medical supplies which I put in my small rucksack. Finally I examined my umbrella, folding and unfolding it a couple of times. From my second trek onwards, my umbrella had always played a big role, protecting me from the rain, the scorching rays of the sun, and also improvising as a walking stick. I also used it like a shooting stick for resting on. And sometimes an umbrella can be very useful as a basket for a collection of plant specimens. I would often buy a strong, brand new umbrella for each new trek.

To suit my individual taste, I included in my provisions some dried meat, candies, cigarettes and many rolls of toilet paper. When I checked, everything was all right, but still I wasn't satisfied, and I had a feeling that I had missed something. I usually feel like this when preparing for a trek, although I know that once I start, everything will be all right. Inevitably, I always take much more than I need.

Next morning I tried to contact a few people who I understood had been on the Dolpo trek, so that I could gather some

more information on this area. I was told that only two Nepalese officials had been there; Col. Aditya Shumshere J. B. Rana, and Mr. Dor Bahadur Bista. I tried to contact Col. Rana by telephone and I was told he was at Nagarkot, outside Kathmandu. I was fortunate to obtain a quick appointment with Mr. Bista, who was project manager at that time for the Remote Area Development Project. I went to see Mr. Bista in his office in the Singha Durbar building. The huge hall was divided into a few small rooms by ply-wood veneers. After crossing a few rooms I saw Mr. Bista's name plate outside his room. There was no office boy at the door, so I went in and saw a small man with a soft, gentle personality who nodded his head to welcome me. Talking with Mr. Bista, I found that he had visited only a few parts of the Dolpo region and didn't have very detailed information. The information I obtained from him, however, seemed very reasonable and promised to be very useful. He gave me a very thick report of 400 pages on different remote areas of Nepal. There was one chapter on Dolpo, which contained very little information compared to that on other remote areas.

At 2 o'clock, after concluding my meeting with Mr. Bista, I went to John's home. He finished packing his personal gear and asked me if we should take tinned and dried foods. We went to his well stocked store room, which was like a provision store, crammed with colourful tins and a good stock of liquor. He was able to obtain these because of his diplomatic import privileges. We took about forty tins of sardines, two dozen of tuna fish, two dozen of sausages, sixty packets of dried soup, three packets of beef and chicken bouillon, five packets of corn flakes, two packets of Rice Crackles, fifteen tins of condensed milk, one big Christmas pudding, as well as other necessary items such as sugar, salt, pepper, noodles and sugar cubes. We made a list of all these provisions so that we could work out their price, as it was our understanding that we would always share the cost of the food. John wanted to make a donation of whisky and

imported drinks so he took four bottles of whisky, three of wine and one big bottle of cognac. After putting these into tin trunks, I telephoned Bob and asked what he was bringing. He replied jokingly, "I am carrying the cheapest possible things", (necessary items such as rice, flour, onions, curry powder, garlic, cooking oil, tea, coffee, sugar, biscuits etc.). We realized that we had quite sufficient for three people for two months.

At 5 o'clock we took all our gear, rations and provisions to Bob's home. There he had arranged seven or eight porters with Nepali baskets who were waiting for us. We took out all our gear from our Land-Rover. Bob's parents came out and greeted us very warmly. They appeared to be very happy with our arrangements and seemed quite certain that our trek would be a great success. Bob had bought seven pairs of canvas boots and seven warm military sweaters which he gave to each porter. Bob knew most of them very well, as he often used to take them on his treks. They seemed very happy with their new sweaters and boots, and proceeded to compare them with each other. Bob introduced to us a dark skinned man in his early thirties, very bright and smiling; he said that his name was Lal Bahadur Tamang and that he was to be our head cook.

Lal Bahadur took out all the rations from our jeep as well as what Bob had collected before, dividing everything up for the porters. He did this most meticulously, weighing every packet and calculating each load. Then he himself would test each load by carrying it for some time to make sure everything was equally distributed. Because of the way he handled and directed the porters, my first impressions of Lal Bahadur were most favourable. I quickly recognized that he would be a very competent "Sirdar" or head porter during the trek. However, his personality had yet to prove to me that he would be a good cook.

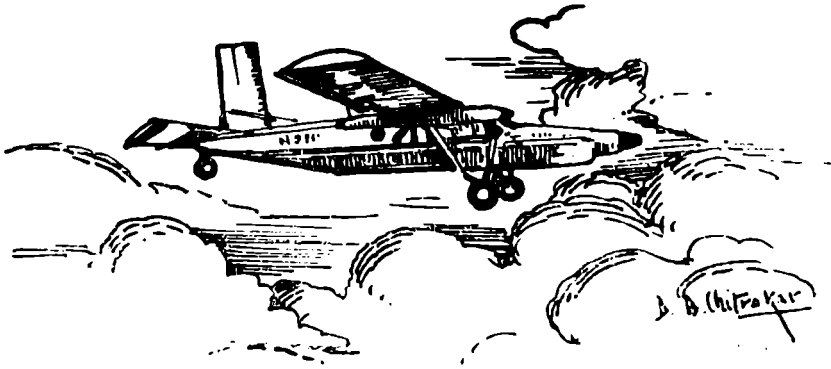
After the evening tea, we gave some money in advance to Lal Bahadur to distribute to the porters and told them to go to

Pokhara by bus the next day. From there they would have to walk to Dhorpatan and wait for us at the airfield, which we would reach by air in a few days.

John chartered a Pilatus Porter, a small plane from the U. N. Office. The flight was confirmed for early morning on 25 May and we were told we had to be at the airport by 6 a. m. The pilot was Hardy Feuror, a Swiss pilot. John and I arrived at the airport well ahead of time, with our luggage already packed and we waited for Bob and Hardy. We were concerned about the weight of our luggage as we knew Hardy was very strict in this matter. I still remembered how, during one of our last treks, Hardy had asked us to throw out delicious green vegetables because we were over weight. Finally Bob arrived with his father and his aunt, Helen Fleming. After some time we saw Hardy's flashy white Benz sports car drive up and he, wearing a fresh white military shirt and navy pants, stepped out. Complete with reflector sunglasses he looked very smart and because of his slim frame he appeared young for his age. He greeted us in his typical stilted English. He took off his glasses and his slightly drooping lids made him look like an angry young man. That morning he didn't look very happy; perhaps he'd had a long night. Luckily this time he wasn't too fussy about our weight limit and seemed quite interested in our trip. We all piled into the plane through the tiny door and the plane took off at exactly 6:30 a. m. We were all excited.

Soon we were flying quite high. The valley of Kathmandu was partly covered with mist, so that some parts we could see quite clearly, while at times we were plunged into the mist and unable to see anything at all. Flying in such a small plane is not very exciting. It is similar to that of the normal course of flight in a big plane, but one realizes the sensational feeling of the small plane when the plane makes a sharp angled turn. It is so strange to observe the earth's surface turning on the same angle as the plane's movement has made. From the plane we

could see we were crossing Gorkha and Pokhara. After a one hour and seven minutes flight, the beautiful valley of Dhorpatan appeared and we landed on quite a reasonable airfield.



CHAPTER TWO

DHORPATAN

*“When I went out
In the spring meadows
To gather violets
I enjoyed myself
So much that I stayed out all night”*

Japanese Haiku

There were only a few houses, but as soon as we landed, dozens of villagers surrounded us. The adults were looking inside the plane while young children were gazing at our gear being unloaded onto the ground. Everyone stared at us as we shifted our gear to the edge of the airfield, but no one attempted to help us. Hardy was always concerned about the weather, and waited for the direction of the wind to become favourable so that he could fly back to Kathmandu.

We enquired amongst the villagers as to whether or not our porters from Kathmandu had arrived, since there was no sign of them. We saw one smart looking man from Kathmandu coming towards us, who introduced himself as Mr. D. J. Rana, and told us that he had been working there for the last seven years in the Tibetan refugee camp under SATA (Swiss Association for Technical Assistance). He was pleased to meet us, and being an educated man, was hungry for some Kathmandu gossip. He had had no social connection on his own level during his time here as he spent all his time with the villagers and refugees. I asked him for details of the possibilities of hiring new porters. He was quite helpful, supplying us with valuable information

and said that here there were only Tibetan refugees, who did not make good porters.

He invited me to a small teashop nearby. To get there we had to make our way by stepping from one rock to another as most of the land was quite damp with thick meadows, and the soil was pitch black. The teashop was dark, and had no table or chairs, so everyone had to sit on the floor which was covered by long thin carpets, decorated with circular patterns and made by the tie-knot process. I noticed that the land-lady was wearing a draper around her waist, which was made from the same material as the carpet and by the same tie-knot process, but with a different design. I heard the sound of the plane's propellor and left the teashop in time to see Hardy about to take off. Waving good-bye to him I went back to the restaurant and sat on the floor, waiting for the tea to be served.

Mr. Rana and I became quite friendly, and for some time we exchanged conversation as Nepalese usually do, asking each other's origins and whom we knew, and in this way got to know each quite well. He seemed quite happy there, but at the same time I could sense that he was homesick for Kathmandu. I asked him if he had any knowledge of the trek we were about to set out on. He replied that, even after 7 years in Dhorpatan, he had never been beyond Tarakot (north of Dhorpatan, a gateway to the Dolpo region). I was glad that he had at least trekked that far, and was thus able to get some information from him, such as how many days it took to reach Tarakot, where to stop and what it looked like, because very soon we were heading to the same village.

From his description of the trail I realized that there was some risk in trekking with my canvas boots, as he mentioned that we had to walk for almost half a day in the snow. I knew I had been foolish to prepare for such a big trek with these low quality, Indian-made canvas boots, and became very worried.

I asked Mr. Rana if he would arrange to get me some second-hand leather boots, and he assured me that he would check in the village.

Having finished my tea I asked the land-lady if she could cook our lunch. I was not, in fact, keen on having lunch prepared by others, as we had a lot of tinned food with us. I always love to eat the village style dhal-bhat, cooked in their own way. There is a lot of difference between the dhal-bhat (a Nepalese staple food consisting of rice and lentle curry), we cook at home, and that cooked in these small huts. Here the taste was quite exotic, although difficult to describe. After arranging lunch, I went back to the airfield where John was sitting on a pile of bedding rolls, reading a novel. Bob was talking to the villagers in "Pahadi" Nepali. They all surrounded him and were giggling at him.

The whole valley of Dhorpatan, except the airfield, was rich green with every inch of the land covered by vegetation. The surrounding hills were not very high, but as the valley was quite small, we could not see the high mountains beyond the hills. These were all covered with blue pine *Pinus Wallichiana* and higher up with fir trees *Abies Spectabilis*.

The vegetation of Dhorpatan falls into the category usually described as the west midland forest type*. The composition of the forest is mostly of the "upper" forest type, that is, on the damp side of the valley such species as mountain oak *Quercus dilatata*, horse chestnut *Aesculus indica*, walnut *Jugelans regia* and maple *Acer aesium* abound. These are the dominating broad leaf species found in the valley and wet areas of this region. Most of the drier aspects of the mountains are covered with blue pine forest *Pinus Wallichiana*, and fir *Abies Spectabilis* replacing chir pine *Pinus longifolia* higher up.

* J. D. A. Stainton, **Forest of Nepal**, John Murray, London, 1972.

Moist alpine scrub grows profusely, Junipers *Juniperus walichiana* being the main species. Occurrence of this species must be due to the exceptional climatic conditions. This species does not generally form forest, south of the main Himalayan region according to J. D. Stainton. The most beautiful aspects of Dhorpatan at this time of the year are the colourful flowers growing in the grasslands. In the wet areas near fine rivulets there were numerous yellow dandelion flowers and small purple flowers of the gentian species, all displaying the spread of the beauty of spring. There were also yellow primrose *Primula sikkimensis* and white anemone *anemone obtilusa*. Dhorpatan as a whole is a lovely valley and we were quite enthusiastic to explore it as soon as we could.

But there was nobody to look after our camp, which we had decided to pitch on the side of the airfield. We sorted out all our gear and pitched the tent. After that, Bob and John had lunch—brought from Bob's home. I decided to eat my favourite dish, dhal-bhat instead of Bob's brown bread sandwiches, so I set off for the teashop. There I met Mr. Rana again, who at my request arranged for one of his assistants to look after our camp and gear, so that we could go for a nature walk.

Bob took his gun with 32 gauge cartridges for his bird collection, John and I, took our cameras and binoculars, and we moved towards the south, to start the first nature outing of our big trek. We saw a few yaks, grazing together with water buffaloes; it is quite strange to see together. The water buffalo is a tropical species, whereas the yak belongs to high altitudes. Anyway, both of the animals seemed quite happy and healthy in this valley of 9,000 feet altitude.

From this valley of Dhorpatan, to the extreme south, one of the tributaries of the Utter Ganga river flows in the form of a shallow but wide river. We took off our shoes and crossed it, never imagining the water could be so cold. After crossing the

river, I sat on a big rock rapidly massaging my feet in order to generate some heat, and then put my shoes back on. The forest had a mixed composition of fir *Abies spectabilis*, blue pine *Pinus wallichiana* and rhododendron *Rhododendron campanulatum*. This thickly covered forest looked like a good place for birds. We walked for an hour, but couldn't see any strikingly colourful birds, although there were numerous small ones whose abundance was manifested by their calls.

They were so restless and shy that to see them was sometimes difficult. Bob whistled, cupping his hands over his mouth, imitating the birds and calling them. He did this a few times, but we didn't see any birds flying near, although I could see that these small birds were quite active, and could hear more and more calls back and forth from many birds. After some time we saw a few birds, such as coal black tit *Parus ater*, flycatchers *musci capidae* family and rose finches *Carpodacus* family flying restlessly amongst the pine trees. Bob shot a coal black tit. This is a very tiny bird with jet black wings and head, and a distinct crest. The cheeks are remarkably white, and white spots are vividly displayed on the jet black wings.

Near the rhododendron branches in a stream we could see the beautiful glossy Himalayan black bird *Turdus bouboul* with its attractive musical call. The pitch dark colour of the bird camouflaged it well against the dark bushy background, but its yellow beak was observed quite easily. Making a couple of rounds of the area, we found that the forest was a uniform mixture of three important species, but when we looked at the French coloured map of the vegetation, this area was marked as *juni-perus indica* forest. Perhaps it would have been more precise to mark it as blue pine forest in the lower hills and fir higher up. At about three o'clock we descended into the valley from the other end of the hill, and as we were coming up to our camp, we saw many Tibetan skylarks *Alanda gulgula* pecking at the ground, and making loud calls. Bob remarked that this was

their courtship song. The Tibetan skylark, has a distinct crest with numerous dark spots on the white breast. Bob shot one of them.

The weather all day had been quite pleasant and cold but not chilly, just perfect for walking up and down. The sky was almost clear with a few patches of silver clouds, and the whole atmosphere was of crystal, perhaps because of the fresh shower before our arrival. The valley was vividly green and we could see the rays of the setting sun reflecting in the form of shimmering stars in the winding views of the Utter Ganga river.

I was quite happy to stay one day in Dhorpatan. It was relaxing and at the same time it helped us to acclimatise to the altitude. So none of us were hurried, nor concerned about the porters not arriving before us.

Evening proved to be chilly. I took out my ash gray thick jumper made of English wool. Bob busied himself stuffing his birds immediately he returned to camp. All the villagers were quite interested in Bob now, and friendly with him. They were all so surprised at how quickly he de-gutted the bird after cutting it at the abdomen. He put one finger inside the tiny bird, pulling everything out from tail to head, and turned the whole tiny body inside out. Within a few minutes he had cleaned inside the skin and rubbed it with antibiotic powder. He then stuffed it with cotton wool restoring it to its original shape, and then stitched the bird up. Everything was done within a few minutes almost like magic. All the villagers were so astonished, and wondered why and how he had done this. Their surprise was expressed in giggling and looking at each other.

I wasn't so hungry. I had a few bites of Bob's sandwiches and drank some tea. At six o'clock the valley became dark, as the shadows of the mountains and hills covered it quite early. I got into my tent and popped into my sleeping bag, feeling

happy to be out camping again and warming up in the thick felt sleeping bag. I put my hands behind my head and stared in front of me, my eyes wide open, feeling very relaxed and satisfied at being here -away from official problems, bureaucratic pressure and social taboos ! So free and so relieved.

I woke up at about six a. m., opened my tent and looked outside. The whole valley was thickly covered with mist and I quickly went back to my warm sleeping bag. I didn't sleep, but lay there wondering if our porters would arrive to-day from Kathmandu. As there was no one to make tea for us this morning, I realized that one of us would have to make it. However, I saw a small boy watching our tent from 100 feet distance, so I called him—welcoming him with my hand—and asked him to go to the tea shop and send a total of ten cups of tea, three at a time, in big glasses. The old lady, with a scarf tied tightly under her chin, came to our camp holding a dirty aluminium kettle in one hand and in the other three glasses, held upright with a finger plunged into each. I'm sure she must have been glad of this early morning sale of tea-ten cups for three people. She poured a glassful of tea for me and then went to Bob's and John's tents. She couldn't find Bob, presumably he had gone bird watching. The tea was quite good, but without enough sugar for me. I'm sure this was not the case for John: from my tent I could clearly see him grimacing at its sweet taste. I drank about three glassfuls and then went outside.

The mist was slowly rising and the valley was clearing as in a dream land, but a thick layer still hung over the river. It must have been vapour rising from the water. All of a sudden a middle-aged Tibetan man came up to me wearing his heavy "Bakkhu", a traditional sagging costume with long wide sleeves, one of which was left hanging empty in the usual manner. Although I didn't invite him, he came right up and sat at the edge of my tent. I was a little upset by his untimely visit. With a very weird smile,

he asked a chain of questions, in broken Nepali such as who we were and where we were from. When I asked him the purpose of his visit he mentioned that he had been sent by Mr. Rana, as he knew I wanted to buy a pair of leather walking boots. He took out a well wrapped packet from the wide folds of his bodice and opened it, murmuring that these were very good quality shoes. They were black military boots, fairly new, but obviously second-hand. I was quite happy to see them and wore them to check whether or not they fitted. With thin socks, the size was just right, but I was sure that with thick woollen socks they would be very difficult for me to wear. But there was no alternative, and I had to buy them. I paid sixty rupees without bargaining, and felt rather relieved.

We were still waiting for the porters, who should have arrived in Dhorpatan one day ahead of us and were a little angry with Lal Bahadur Tamang. I could imagine them enjoying themselves walking from Pokhara to Dhorpatan with no-one to push them on. They must have been having a great time, stopping everywhere they liked, making erotic jokes, admiring the village belles, smoking, singing and drinking *chayang*, the white fermented local brew, made from millet and rice.

Before they arrived we were arranging the hire of other local porters—we needed seven or eight more to take all our gear. Mr. Rana helped us quite a lot to gather many people who wanted to go on our trek with us. It looked as if Dhorpatan was full of Tibetan refugees, who practically dominated the whole village system. I talked with many Tibetans who were ready to accompany us. There were altogether fifteen of them, two of whom were Sarkis, an “untouchable” pair and one teenage boy from a Gurung family. Sarkis form that ethnic group of cobblers. These two shy Sarkis were watching us at a distance from the crowd, with the hope that we would take them, but they didn’t dare to ask, as they were afraid of our refusal and also because

they were wary of what the other Tibetans would say.

I talked to the Tibetan porters for hours, but found we were not at all progressing towards a conclusion. They demanded and argued very strongly. They first put forward heavy demands such as that we had to take at least ten people from their group; that we had to take all responsibility for their food. They wanted twenty rupees (\$ 1.70) a day each and didn't want any "untouchables" to come along with them. They all spoke fairly good Nepali, but they pretended not to understand whenever our argument was strong. I personally wanted to include the two Sarkis and the Gurung boy, who looked very gentle and non-demanding and wanted to hire only five Tibetan porters. I suspected that these Tibetan porters formed a ring. Their union seemed quite strong and they were really hard nuts to crack. In their group, I noticed three of strong character, who formed the nucleus of this ring. If I hired any one of these three, we would have a tough time, as they looked very fussy, demanding and difficult to control. Bob Fleming also agreed with my opinion not to include these three ring leaders.

I decided to hire the two Sarki porters and the Gurung boy and asked them to come early in the morning with enough rations for seven days. They agreed to come with us for twelve rupees a day; the usual rate at that time. I selected a few Tibetan porters, offering them cigarettes and behaving very nicely. I took five of them away from the crowd and talked to them for a while, convincing them that we would probably give them more than we had promised if they behaved and worked well. I insisted that none of the three "leaders" would be coming. They also agreed that the three whom I had suspected were trouble makers. After a tough discussion, I took the porters with us and gave them in the presence of Mr. Rana, twenty-five rupees advance to buy their rations. All the accounts and payments were done by John Blower, as most of the transportation cost was to be borne by FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization).

To work in the field like this, or for that matter, to work in any kind of development project is always fun providing there are not many pressures and complicated formalities of accounting and administration. Sometimes I realize that working under a system of trust simplifies this administration. A person can then concentrate whole-heartedly on his specific field, without having to worry about complicated side tracks. For a person to work on a development project in this country, there are many formalities, paper work and complications which restrict the progress of the project. For example, Nepalese personnel, working in government fields, have to get advance money, writing a full page of formal application. Whenever they spend money it must be according to government rules and not according to practical situations. It is quite clear that, without manipulation of the rules, no one can really do a perfect job directed towards the real target. But it is always risky to manipulate these rules and this is one of the main reasons why government development work is hampered. For example if an officee in-charge engages labour for a project in one area, there are specific rules about how much he must pay for those labourers in that district. Whereas within that wage limit, it is very difficult to find labourers, so one has to increase the wages to above the government rate if he is interested in getting his work done. This is possible by engaging a minimum number of labourers, but increasing this number on the pay roll; which naturally is against the law, and who will take these risks ? This is a big problem for most Nepalese government field workers.

This same problem is arising now in different ways. As a government officer, when I travel I get a travelling and supplement allowance. For every mile of my trek I am supposed to receive a certain amount of money, provided my travelling mileage is certified by the different village panchayats. But the problem is that the object of our trip was to study the flora and fauna of the region, especially the habitats and distribution of the wild

animals. so our route generally took us in jungle and remote areas where there was less disturbance to the animals and the chances of seeing them as higher. To go to a village away from our planned route was often quite troublesome and time consuming, especially in the mountainous regions where it would take a long time to walk to the villages even though we could see them clearly. However I went on these treks for my own pleasure, so this problem was minimised.

At four o'clock, after we had optimistically arranged everything for the next day, the porters from Kathmandu arrived. We were all so happy with the knowledge that we could start our trek the next day, that we forget our anger at them for being late. All the Kathmandu porters seemed cheerful and as fresh as they had been in Kathmandu, even after four day's walk. I saw only two of them wearing their new boots and I was sure the others were keeping them safely to wear only when it was really necessary. Lal Bahadur greeted us from a long distance with a nice "Namaste". After some time they fixed their gear and Lal Bahadur started preparing the meal. He looked very strong, although physically he was only average Nepali size. He seemed energetic and high spirited. His face was very dark, but his smiles made him always bright. He was a very happy man, always joking, but I had yet to find out how good a cook he was. We were all concerned about his ability, as we had to depend on him for good and appetising food to keep us in good health and enable us to undertake this long journey. Today he was quite enthusiastic, intending to display his working skills to his two new sahibs, John and myself. He had already impressed Bob Fleming. The way he arranged the cooking places was very efficient, and I saw that he had a good command over the other porters, and had everything done precisely and spontaneously.

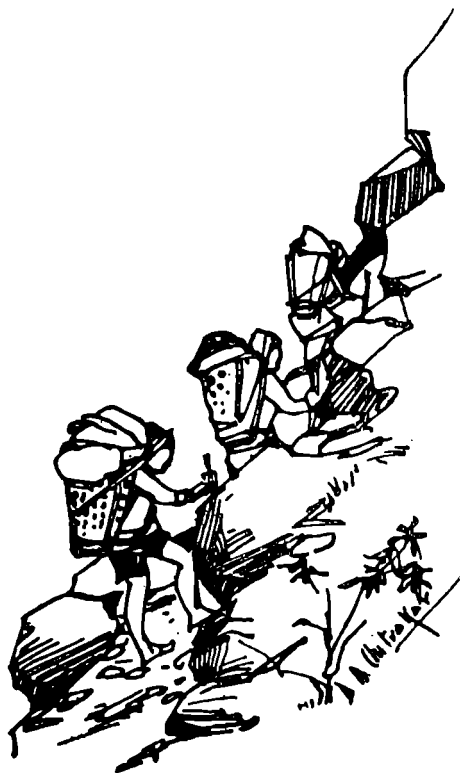
The valley was darkening and the wondering villagers had

not yet left us alone, but were still gazing at us. I asked a few questions about the wildlife of this area, but not many people were aware of it and their answer to my questions were very vague.

To announce dinner, Lal Bahadur hit a brass plate with a wooden rolling pin and exclaimed “khana tayar bhayo, sahib” (food is ready, sir). He didn’t speak English and I was quite surprised, that having been associated with Bob Fleming for such a long time, he couldn’t speak a single word of English. It seemed that Bob had learned Nepali from him and always spoke it with him. The food was ready: the good smell of chicken curry drifted over to me in my tent. He had prepared rice, lentil, fried potatoes and of course chicken curry. He served us all one big plate, putting out every item separately and included Chapatties, a dry, flat, round bread made from flour. The food was quite all right: I could live with his style of cooking for a long time, but I realized that in order to have a really fantastic meal, I would have to cook myself. My way of cooking was to mix everything in the saucepan with my magic touch and then I would enjoy it thoroughly.

By six o’clock we had finished our dinner and quite soon after we went to our tents. I was writing up my diary when I heard the strange sound of a small plane. I went outside to see if the plane was landing on the air-field. I couldn’t see any sign of a plane, but its sound was coming from very near. We were all wondering about it, but there were no villagers around us whom we could ask what was happening. After some time the hissing sound slowed to a putter and we couldn’t imagine what was happening. Next morning I got up early, extremely curious to know how the sound had been made. Some of the villagers said that a small plane had come to the next valley and made drops—six or seven boxes of different goods. There were toys, tinned food, sweets and toffees. Chains of questions were aroused in my mind. But it never solved.

Lale brought tea and chapattis with peanut butter. While we were having breakfast, all the porters finished their morning lunch and the Tibetan porters and the two Sarkis came to our camp site well ahead of time. Lale distributed all the gear into equal loads for the Nepalese and Tibetan porters, but I could see he was a little prejudiced towards his good friends who came from Kathmandu. The Tibetan porters complained each time of Lale's discrimination. After much arguing, the load was distributed. All the Nepalese porters including the Sarkis, had big Nepalese baskets into which they first stuffed their food and cooking pots, and then the divided load. The Tibetans had no baskets, but they tied all the gear and their food into a sack with strong woollen ropes. Finally the kitchen boy stuffed all our kitchen equipment and some necessary food into his basket. He seemed very happy to be our kitchen boy, not only because he had a small load, but because there were a lot of possibilities for him to enjoy our good left-over food. Finally, we were all ready to go and with much enthusiasm, desire and energy, we stepped forward onto the first leg of our trek.



CHAPTER THREE

TOWARDS TARAKOT

“Let me live where I will . . . on this side is the city, on that the wilderness, and ever I am leaving the city more and more and withdrawing into the wilderness.”

Henry David Thoreau

We could follow two routes to go to our destination: one was along the Uttar Ganga river, which was longer but easier route; the other was a short cut, crossing a number of passes. We chose to take the shorter route. We climbed for about three hours up a south facing sparsely forested hill of Dhorpatan valley. This side of the valley was more occupied by the villagers than the other was, as the villagers wanted to get the maximum amount of sun which always fell on the south face of the mountain. Generally, in this country, habitation is concentrated on the southern aspects of the mountains. The north facing areas are denser in vegetation.

The pass to cross, Dhorpatan hill, was 11,000 feet. We rested for a while and looked back for our last glimpse of Dhorpatan: the valley seemed small, but the Uttar Ganga river was very prominent. We continued to walk in the dusk as we had started our journey quite late and had not made much headway. We were still fresh and anxious to progress. We had difficulty looking for a campsite and finally chose the dry river bed of Phagune khola. It was hard for me to pitch the tent as I couldn't place pegs properly in the loose pebbles. I finally managed to pitch it by tying the supporting ropes to large rocks. The site was wonderful and the babbling mountain stream made a pleasant background sound. After a wonderful dinner, especially with a nature talks

curry, we had a peaceful camp fire near the kitchen. All the porters collected dead and dry logs from the river bank. We made some good black coffee over the camp-fire which supported us during our discussion of our further plans and our nature talks.

We heard a few calls of some pheasants: Bob guessed it must be a danfe *Lophophorus impejanus*, a multi-coloured Nepalese national bird. He told us about the interesting distribution of the blood pheasant *Ithaginis cruentus* and koklass pheasant *Pucrasia macrolopha*. He believes that the blood pheasant is available from the east of Nepal, ending in the Ganesh Himal, whereas the cheer and koklass pheasants are found from the western border of Nepal, their distribution ending in central Nepal. The reason of this localised distribution is still a big question mark for ornithologists. This was of real interest to me. Next morning we got up at 6 a. m. and took down the tents. By ten o'clock we reached the highest pass so far, called Phagune Dhuri (i. e. the head of the Phagune river). Our altimeter read 13,000 feet. From this pass we saw the beautiful view of the Himalayan range. The day was fine, so we could spot the snow capped peaks of Dhaulagiri, Churin and Putha Himal. Coming down from the pass we had a wonderful sight of a danfe. It is one of the most beautiful birds I have ever seen. Of a good size, it flew at four or five feet above ground level, flapping its wings violently. It disappeared into the bush so quickly that I had insufficient time to distinguish its beautiful colours. But as it splashed brightly and quickly before my eyes, I saw a flash of colours from emerald green to crimson red. It was indeed beautiful. I continued to watch in case I could get another glimpse of this magnificent bird, hoping also to see his mate. I was amused to see that in bird life, males are beautiful and the females drab and monotonous; whereas in human life, females are so much more attractive than males. I waited for a while, but the bird was so shy that it never appeared again.

After descending a little we came down through a rhododendron forest. The canopy of the forest was mostly covered in white and pink flowers. The trees were not very tall, the branches were creeping and the bark was like yellowish paper. Whenever I see this kind of forest I always remember an interesting incident which happened on one of my previous treks with John. In the Larkya area north of Trisuli in Kalochumen Tal, which is an alpine lake surrounded by creeping rhododendrons, we were looking for musk deer. The whole bush was abundant in musk deer droppings and hoofprints. We walked and crawled inside the maze with the big hope of seeing the musk deer as we were always finding fresh droppings. We decided to separate at a certain point and were lost in the thick bush. It is so branchy and creeping that a man could hardly stand. We had no luck tracing the deer and were so tired of crawling that for a long time we could not stretch our muscles. It was so dense that we had to crawl like animals for two or three hours, finding our way out, cutting the branches.

Since this incident, I am quite hesitant to walk inside this dense foliage of *Rhododendron barbetum* again. So as we were descending, I was careful to follow the faintly marked trail. John and I told of our mishap during the Larkya trek to Bob, who realized these difficulties quite well; perhaps he had similarly been lost. This track was rich in many varieties of rhododendron— the violet-red flower of *Rhododendron arbortum*, Nepal's national flower, appeared way down in the valley and on the open slopes there were *Rhododendron anthropogan* bushes, with sweet smelling leaves, used by Tibetans for making incense. In this forest, we saw numerous pipits, finches and leaf warblers. Once we passed this rhododendron forest, the trail led to a beautiful hemlock forest, intermingled with high altitude oak *Quercus dilatata*.

That evening we camped by the bank of a mountain stream: to camp by a river is comfortable for everyone and I enjoyed

the romantic aura that hangs in the air.

Next day on our trek we met a Tamang “shikari”, a hunter who was carrying a muzzle gun of very old design. It was very heavy, with a single bore. I found him the best man to give us information on wild animals of this area. He was in his late forties, and was accompanied by his son. Surprisingly he was well dressed in black Nepali trousers and shirt with a coat on top and beautiful shoes. I was wondering why he was carrying a gun, so I asked him if he was out hunting. “No, I always carry a gun”, was his reply. He made his own gunpowder and used it mostly to drive out the monkeys from his field. Sometime he shot himalayan thar and pheasant. I asked if he had shot any blue sheep or forest leopard; with the help of the villagers, he said, he had trapped one forest leopard, but had never shot one. He had seen a few blue sheep in the meadows above the tree-line. With his help, I gathered abundant information on this area. In his opinion not much wild life had been destroyed. I was little surprised that they were not very keen on our conversation and tried to get rid of us. Both the shikari and his son left us and went along an unused route into the forest area, disappearing quickly.

Our route now went down to the rivulet called Pelma. The descent was gentle along the spur of the mountain, except for the last part down to the river bed which was quite steep. The day was sunny and descending from the open areas to cool myself, I rushed down to wash my hands and face in the icy-cold water. I saw the tremendous flow of water gushing out from the narrow gorges; the torrent smashed on a big rock, ending in spray. I could see beautiful rainbows in the spray created by the direct sunlight. There was an interesting wooden bridge crossing the narrow Pelma river. It was about four feet wide, made of evenly cut wooden planks, supported by two huge trunks of felled trees. In either side of the bridge were wooden railings affixed into four strong poles at each corner. What interested me was the

hand-work on the poles which were carved into the full body of a man, with a very long Egyptian style face and out-sized penis. Every person, including myself, as they crossed, touched the top of the penis, and as a result it was worn and shiny.

I stood for a while in the middle of the bridge, enjoying the moisture from the spray. The bridge was completely wet as if it had rained, because of the water laden breeze continuously being fanned out from the narrow gorge. I arrived at this spot ahead of my companions and porters; I looked up to the trail: there was no sign of them. So I took off my shirt and soaked myself again in the spray. I saw Lal Bahadur appear way up on the rock cliffs and disappear again inside the boulder-filled mountain.

The sun was still shining brightly and from here we had to climb a very steep, naked, rocky mountain. The trail we followed was faintly marked in the exposed soil and rock, with no sign of trees or shade. I decided not to wait for the party and took the advantage of being first up to the ridge before the others arrived. I climbed up slowly in my own time, resting and balancing. The sun was so powerful that I could even feel the heat of the dry soil through my shoes. The trail was very steep; even to stand properly and to walk on it, one had to bend forward. In such a steep place, the villagers tilled the land without any knowledge of soil conservation. They made terraces by supporting them with loosely fitted rocks and tilled the land very flatly. I'm sure that even scanty rainfall could wash away this laborious work.

Sometimes the trail passed through this tilled land. After a half hour's climb, I reached a small tea shop of the village. I breathed contentedly and sank into a wooden chair, ordering some tea without speaking but by indicating with my upright finger. I looked down and saw my two friends and all the porters coming up slowly. I felt momentarily relieved that this climb was finished and that I could rest completely for a while before

they arrived at the top. I drank a couple of cups of tea. There were a few Gurung people gazing at me, wondering who I was. I didn't speak at all, so they couldn't guess my nationality. They never expected men from Kathmandu to travel and my outfit was completely western style. They guessed that I might be Japanese as they knew Japanese trekked quite a lot. When I went to pay for the tea, I asked in Nepali "how much?". One surprised villager, hearing me, exclaimed "Oh ! He's a Nepali". I wasn't surprised by their exclamations as this had happened many times to me during my previous treks.

After another hour's climb we arrived at Yamakhar, a small village situated on a steep infertile rocky mountain slope. There were not more than twenty houses and every one had a flat roof, thickly covered with hard mud. In every house there were not more than two or three rooms. The rooms were filled with black smoke and one floor led to another by a staircase, made of a single tree trunk, into which foot holds were hewn with an axe. It was quite late to go beyond this village, as the trail further up was still a stiff climb. We had no idea of a good camp site, so we decided to stay back in this village, even though we saw nowhere to pitch our tents. Finally we managed to get permission to pitch our tent on the flat roof of the house of a Gurung family. I was hesitant to drive the peg of my tent into the roof. I was consciously hitting it gently as I did not want to damage the well grounded clean roof. The soil was as hard as cement, so with the permission of the landlord, I drove the peg in deeply to hold my tent. The people there were really kind and very hospitable—not disturbing us as in the other villages. The land-lady in particular was very gracious. She was very young for her husband, who had been in Malaya as a Gurkha recruit soldier. I'm sure that when he came back he must have been a rich man by local standards and so he was able to marry this young lady. The middle-aged landlord was very happy to talk with Bob and John in his broken English. He must have felt that this was a big

honour to be with us and talk his sahibs' language. He was proud to have been a British Gurkha, in spite of having practically nothing now except his small amount of pension and lot of memories of the several important years of his life he had given for his "sahibs".

It was good to have completed the steep climb from the Yamakhar village in the cool of the early morning. It would have been quite treacherous to do it in the sunny daytime. We reached the ridge of the mountains at about ten o'clock, and waited here for brunch, which has always proved the best way to take lunch. The brunch style meal saves time and fits in with the porter's eating habits and our time table. But there was no sign of the porters. Lale arrived with the Nepalese porters after an hour, but the Tibetan porters had not yet come. All our food and provisions were in the Tibetan's sacks. The Tamang porters from Kathmandu were busy cooking their own food. We became more and more hungry and this made us silent and angry. Finally one Tibetan porter arrived who unfortunately wasn't carrying our food either; we all became angry with the fussy Tibetan porters. I was becoming very hungry and finally I joined in with the Tamang's food of "Jhindo." This is cooked from corn flour boiled in a little water and made into a paste like pudding. It is served directly and sometimes with a little green chilli or onion to bite. I took a piece of it and tried to take a gulp, but it was impossible. Lal Bahadur said it would taste good if it were mixed with the chilli and onion. I didn't agree with him.

The Tibetan porters arrived and I was shocked to see that they were so angry and ferocious that they threw their sacks on the ground. One was ready to grab Lal Bahadur and hit him, claiming that he had distributed the load with prejudice. They told me that Lal Bahadur had given the light things like kerosene oil and other voluminous things which looked heavy to the Tamang porters, where as he put all the tinned food, bottles and

heavy things which looked small and were heavy in the Tibetan porter's loads. That was one of the reasons why they were late. I personally checked the loads, weighing them. The Tibetans were justified in their complaint, but the blame did not lie completely with Lal Bahadur, as Tamangs carry baskets, suitable for voluminous things, whereas Tibetans carry sacks, unsuitable for stores such as oil. I ended up compromising by redistributing the loads so that everyone was happy, then we moved on.

By the time we'd done this, it was almost three o'clock, and we still had a long way to go. The map contours indicated that there wouldn't be any suitable site for camping, as the trail went up the mountains and down again. Descending is always pleasant but when one knows that he has to climb up again, he is reluctant to lose altitude. For me, descending is always a problem. The first few days I always develop a swelling in my right knee. It is quite sensitive when pressure is applied during the descent. This time also, I had a painful swelling and had to come down very slowly with the help of my umbrella. However, I wasn't too worried about it, as I knew that after a day or two it would return to normal and after that I would be very strong, walking up and down quite fast.

We arrived in a thickly wooded valley earlier than we expected. The dense rhododendron forest covered almost all the foothills and the central portion of the valley was thickly padded with several inches of jet-black soil. This soil is the result of many hundreds of years of leaf decomposition. In the middle of the valley, we saw many domesticated goats hearded closely into a large wooden enclosure made of poles. Every goat was heavily loaded with a bagful of food stuffs on either side of its back. They carried these goods from one village to another for their business owners.

We arranged the camp-site. The valley was like a deep well and we could only see a small portion of the sky. It was surpri-

sing that within five or ten minutes, the sky, which had been a clear blue, became enveloped with heavy dark clouds. All of a sudden, rain started pouring down heavily. It was impossible to see more than ten feet. It came so quickly that we didn't have time to run for shelter, nor could we manage to pitch our tents. The rain drops were so big and splattered down with such intensity that we could not even open our eyes. We were soaked to our skins in a matter of seconds. As fast as the rain came, it suddenly stopped and again like the magic touch of a wand we could see a very clear blue sky, but we were chilled through and could think only of making a fire quickly to dry ourselves.

Next day the weather was very cloudy. Despite the bad weather, we proceeded northwards, climbing again. We stopped for lunch on a 12,600 foot ridge. Lal Bahadur Tamang had prepared lunch earlier in the camp so it consisted of chapattis, jam, peanut butter and sardines. The ridge up here was a dry meadow and there was no trace of water anywhere, so in all ways it was a "dry lunch" in wet and misty weather. After lunch, the weather cleared up. From this high pass we could see the last hangers of the clouds flying northwards, making the south sky clearer and cleaner. After a while, we could see the most breath-taking landscape before us. Like a dream there appeared a small stupa, a Buddhist temple, a little higher up. It had no design and no art, standing about ten feet tall surrounded by three mounting steps, the lowest one of which was about four feet square. This was topped with a mound on which we would see a tapering small spire. Two completely worn Buddhist flags were hanging in front of it.

I sat on the steps from where I could see the other side of the valley, a completely new horizon of rolling grass lands. Way, way down below in the valley, Shen Khola was flowing like a white serpent. The clear fresh sun, the aftermath of the tropical downpour was casting its golden rays down the valley. It was

overwhelmingly beautiful. To get an even better view, I climbed about twenty feet higher up. I was looking at the completely different sides of the valley. Sitting on a rock, I took my chapattis and rolled the peanut butter on it. I was quite hungry, but the food was unpalatable and I had to force myself to gulp down the dry chapattis and peanut butter, which tasted like a cake made of hay, with no flavour and giving no pleasure.

While eating, my eyes fixed onto a cute little mouse hare, *Ochonta royle* which poked its head out from the edge of a rock. It was only four to five feet away from me. I remained motionless, chewing the hard bread and watching for the mouse hare to emerge. It was looking at me for some time and at last dared to come out fearlessly. Sometimes it nibbled at the thick rock moss and sometimes it watched me cautiously. I froze for about ten minutes and watched the tiny animal unblinkingly. I was so sad not to have my camera with me. As it was raining in the morning I had wrapped it tightly in a polythene bag and packed it in one of my porters' sacks. During my previous treks I have often tried to take a picture of the mouse hare, but I was always unable to get a good shot. They are normally shy and restless and it is unusual for them to allow you to get so close. This moment was a golden opportunity, but my luck was on holidays and I did not have my camera. Because of my non-hostile confrontation, the mouse hare became more daring; now it didn't care about the movement of my hands and legs.

The chapatti I was eating was not fully cooked inside, so with my first three fingers I was playing with the dough from the central portion of uncooked chapatti. Suddenly, without thought, I threw it at the tiny mouse hare. To my great surprise, the marble sized ball of dough hit the mouse hare right on the head and the poor tiny animal tumbled over three or four times down the slope. It was unable to balance itself and circled around before regaining its balance. It stood shocked, stared at me with its big twitching round ears for a while. As soon as its

sense came back, it scurried away, disappearing among the rocks. I roared with laughter at my stupidity and what turned out to be a humorous incident.

We made a decision to camp that night in the valley on the bank of the beautiful Shen Khola. The trail was quite enjoyable and followed the gentle contours of the descent. The evening's golden sun beams were still gently filtering through fire-glowing cloud. The reflection of these divine rays were bouncing back from the innumerable ripples of the khola. Weather makes or breaks trekking. Bright clear weather in a beautiful setting always lightens one's heart and mind. It develops great energy in a person. Sinking overcast days of heavy weather shrink the whole charm and annihilate a person's energy.

We rejoiced in this beautiful weather and when we were coming down we met two people slowly making their way up. One of them was police constable whose feet were completely bandaged and who looked pale and sick. A middle-aged man, with an almost empty basket, was following him. The police constable was suffering from frost bite in his feet which had happened when they were crossing the Maikot pass on the west side of this mountain, about two and a half months ago. At that time, he, with a lawyer, a Provincial District Officer and his wife, were on their way to the district headquarters at Dunie. In the evening, they arrived at the Maikot pass, covered in snow. It was too late to proceed further but they had to cross this pass in order to find a camp-site. The weather was completely misty and it was almost dark. The lawyer, who was the youngest of all, was leading the party. The officer and his wife, holding hands, were following him and the constable was following in the rear. Because of heavy mist and the dark night, they could hardly see each another. They thought the lawyer was in front. The officer's wife's front toes were frozen, as were the constable's and so they couldn't move further on. The officer, his wife and the constable decided to stop beside a big rock, as further

advance was impossible for them. They called to the lawyer in the darkness, the echoes rang to and fro in the valley, but there was no reply from the lawyer. They thought he must have walked very quickly and had gone round to the next valley.

The officer, his wife and the constable spent the whole night by the icy cold rock without any fire to warm themselves. Next morning, they found that part of the woman's toes as well as the constable's were immobile, blue and swollen. They were as hard as rocks. The group somehow reached their destination, but there was no report on the arrival of the lawyer. Finally, it was confirmed that a fatal mishap had befallen the lawyer, who was lost forever somewhere in the mountain crevices. The officer's wife was brought back to Kathmandu immediately for treatment, but the unfortunate constable stayed there, leaving his slight frost-bite to be tended by herbal medicine. However, the local cures did not help him. Now he was making the difficult journey to Pokhara for proper medical treatment to relieve the pain he had suffered for the last two and a half months. By the time I saw his wounds, they had turned completely septic and the poor man had only one porter who helped him by carrying him on his back from time to time. His condition was quite miserable. He told me this story with the high hope that we could perhaps do something for him. We could only help him psychologically by giving him a dozen aspirin and some antibiotic powder to apply to the wound. I saw relief in his face as our party seemed well prepared and consisted of white people who they always believe to be medical doctors. Anyway, I was glad that we were able to give him a psychological boost, although the poor man still had seven days to walk to Pokhara.

This whole story sickened me and was typical of the lack of foresight in administration of Nepal. In the big administrative offices in Kathmandu, high ranking officers depute these poorly fed and salaried people to remote lands where there are no facilities and without giving them enough encouragement.



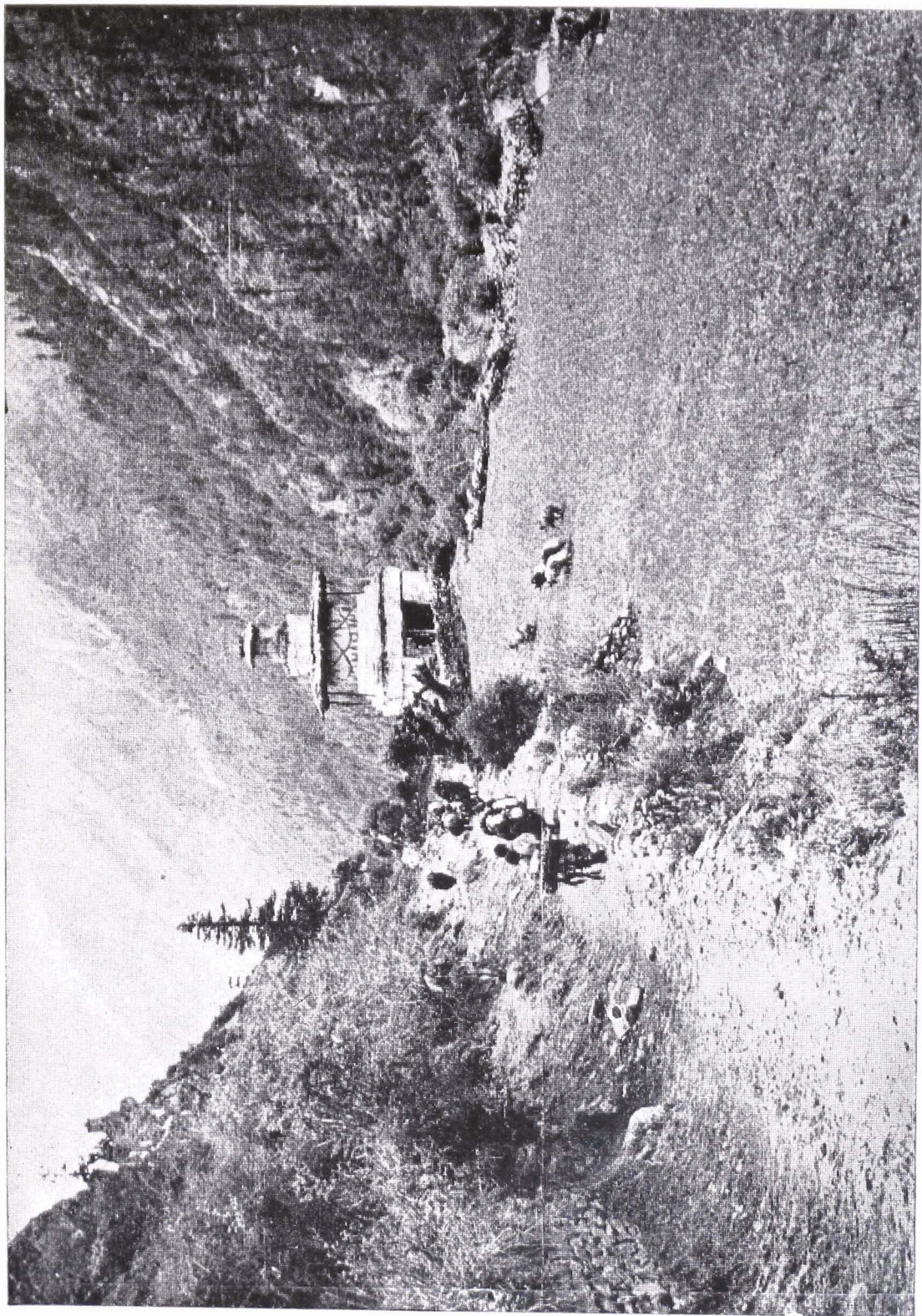
*The only place to find deodar in Nepal is along the side
of Barbung Khola.*



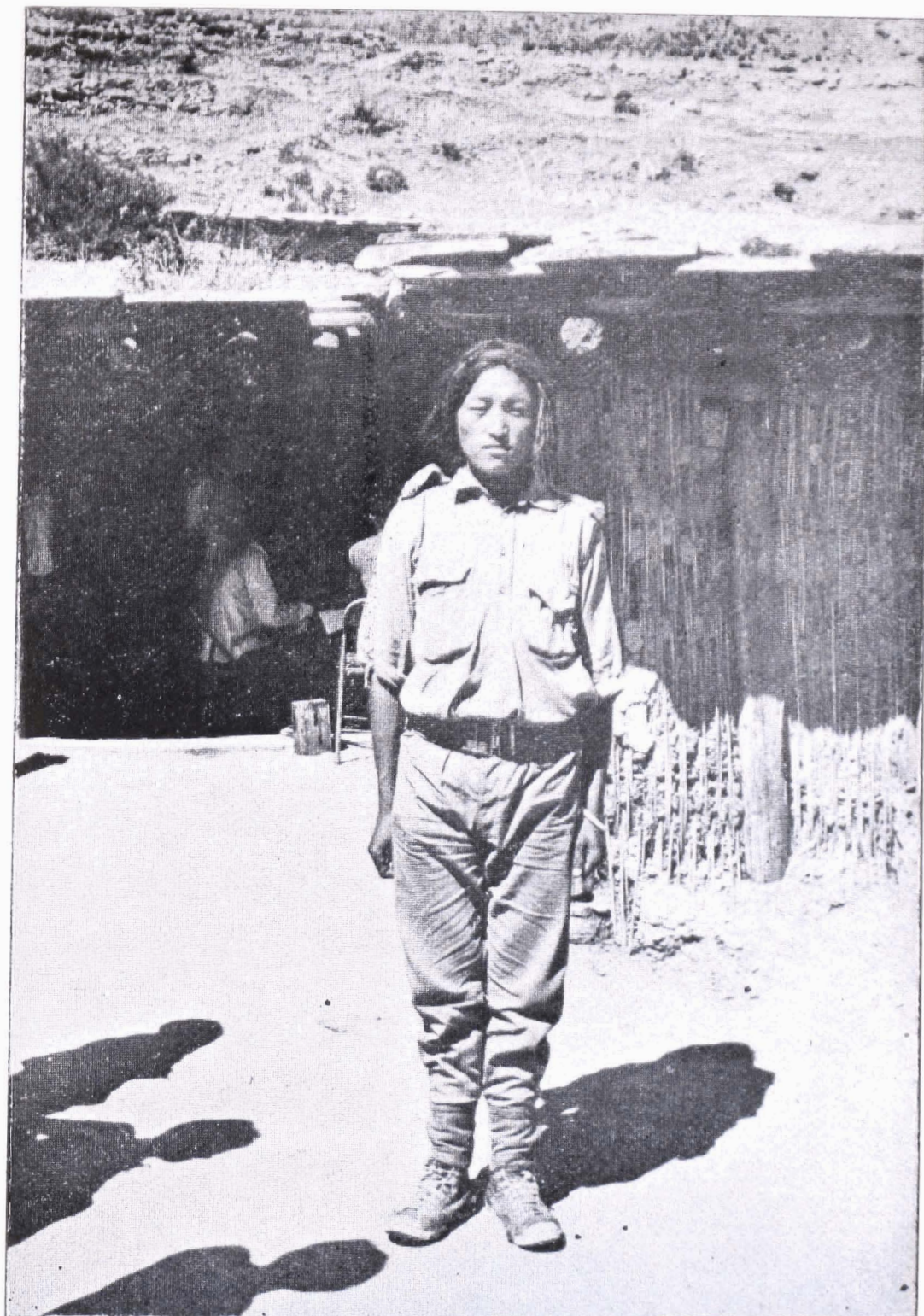
The yak passed us one by one, but I could see their big red eyes looking worriedly towards us as they neared.



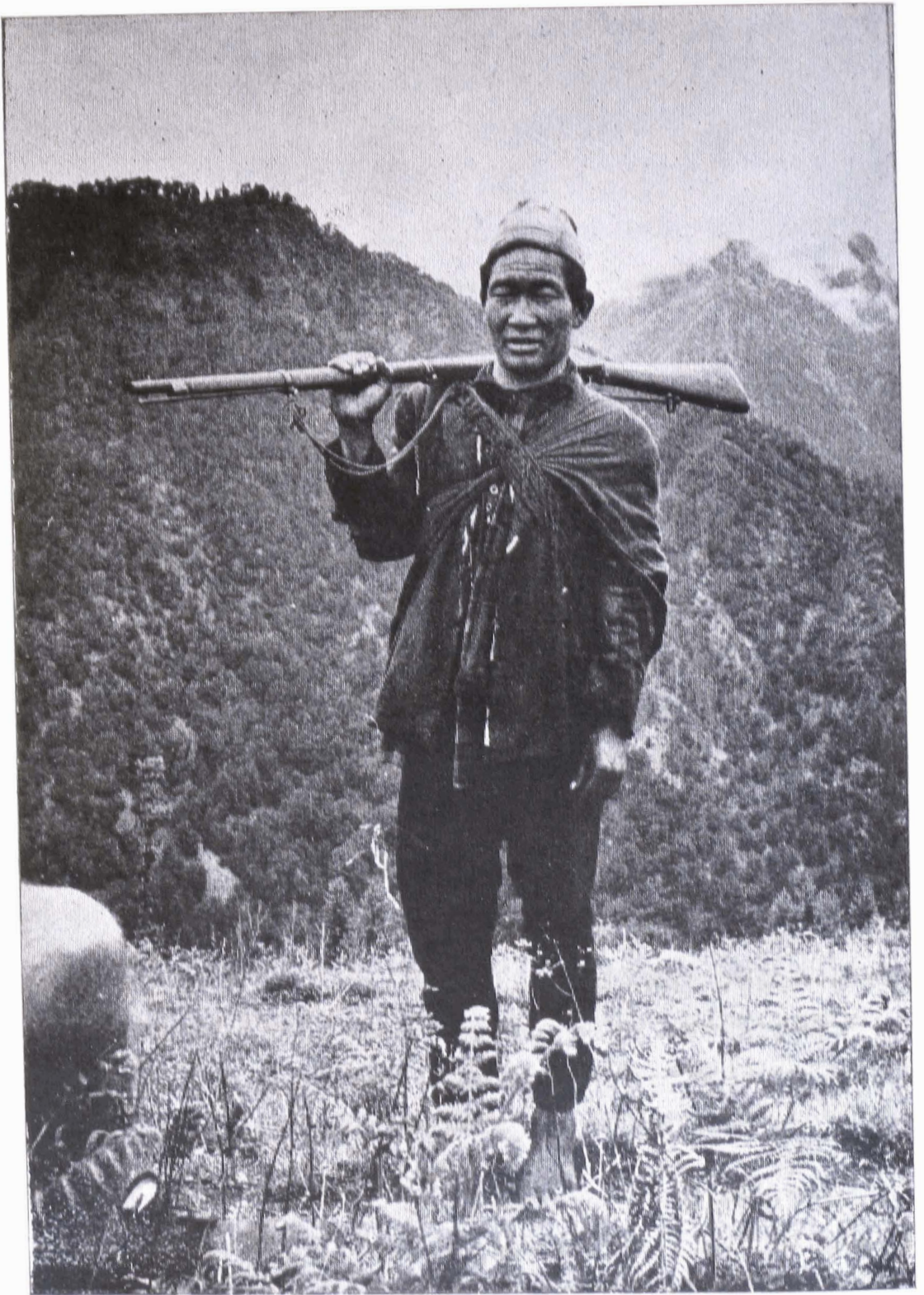
Erotic poles in the bridge of Pelma Khola



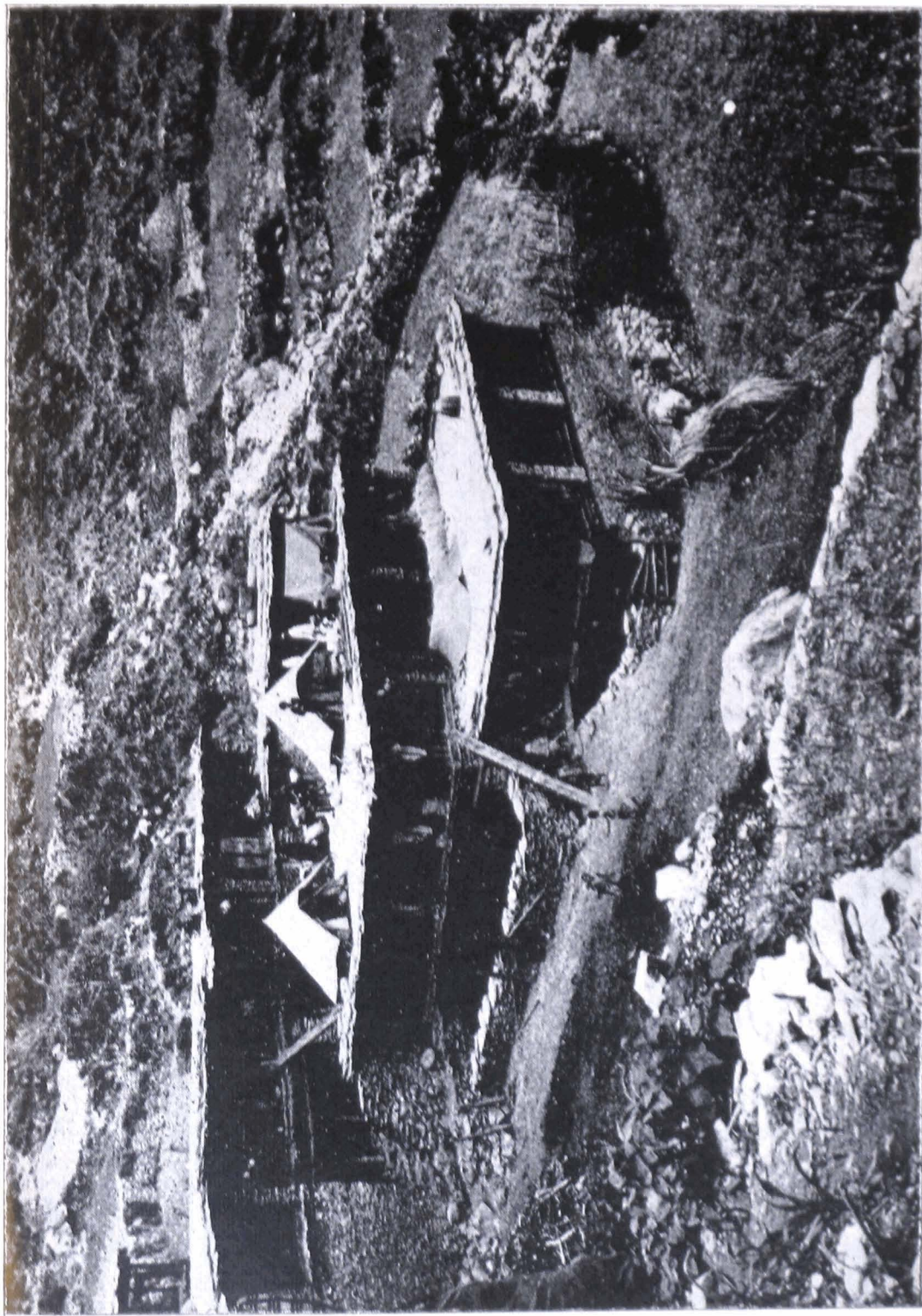
The gateway to a solitary pocket of primitive human settlement is marked by the "Chorten".



A local police man from Tarakot wears his long hair plaited with red ribbon and wound around his head.



A local "Shikari" with his antique muzzle-loading gun.



Camping on the roof tops of Yamakhar Village houses.



It is fascinating to see a tall Birch forest at an elevation of 14,000 feet above the sea level

I had a bitter discussion once with a foreign expert who came to Nepal to work on an assignment for two years, regarding the lack of facilities given to the government employees in remote areas. At that time, the discussion concerned the educated Nepalese who didn't want to go into remote areas to work. He said that these people went to universities in the west and came back with a degree, tape recorder and camera; they always chose a job in Kathmandu and never wanted to go into remote lands. I thought this was such a naive comment, made after one year's work in Nepal when he should have known the socio-economic set-up in the country. I was rather heated, not by my cocktail drink, but by his discourteous and nonsensical argument. He was preaching this to another new foreign expert who had to work in Kathmandu.

I dragged my chair over to them, thumped my glass on the table and said, "wait a minute !" I looked hard at the fussy naive expert and asked, "are you generalizing, or are you relating a special case ?" He said very boldly, "most of them." Many people's attention was diverted to our table as I argued forcefully. Before I explained why they do, I said, "have you ever pondered on why educated people don't go to remote lands for work ? Have you ever considered how many facilities they have up there ? And have you ever looked at how much salary they get ?" I continued seriously "unlike in your country there are no transportation facilities here and one has to walk several days to reach a posting." He tried to interrupt me, but I was so furious with his lack of understanding that I continued "unlike in your country, there are no medical facilities available if something happens to them." I took advantage of his nervousness, "compared to you, some of these people who have the same qualifications and education get one-twentieth of your salary." I reminded him "you came here to work for a certain period. You don't have to live and die here. Hence your spirit of work is naturally more energetic than these people's. Beside this you

can get more facilities here— maximum salary and the lowest cost of living. When you come and work here, you write a report, where problems of economy, administration and social obligations are intricately knotted.” I continued “as you have blamed those Nepalese who come back from foreign universities with a diploma paper, tape recorder and camera, similarly, you, when working here, get a paper of credit added to your curriculum vitae and you go back to your country with the maximum amount of money you have saved from the big gap between expense and income. Of course you have to go to the remote parts and perhaps work hard for a few days in order to thicken your report, the *modus operandum* of which is dubious.” Finally I asked him, “Can you live and work in a place like that, with the same facilities as Nepalese have for five continuous years, with a Nepalese salary ?” He wanted to say something, but my last question left him without a sound argument.

About deputing people to the remote lands, I am sure that those high ranking officers would never have any ideas whatsoever of the difficulties one has to face there. But I know no one can be blamed, neither the administration, nor the individuals. The administration must send people to the remote lands to look after it and individuals are hesitant to go there because of their personal needs. So it is a complex problem. Let’s hope that in time this problem will be solved.

We arrived in the valley of Shen Khola quite early. Shen Khola carried deep, icy cold water with a strong current next to rocky cliffs on the eastern bank. There was a big shed on this bank which was quite large enough to accommodate all our porters. It was made by piling big rocks on top of each other and the roofing was made of slates. Inside the shed it was very dirty and full of goat droppings; perhaps it was used by the same goat herds we had seen a day ago. By this time, we sensed that all the Tibetan porters were trying to go back to Dhorpatan and that

at any time they could give us a lot of trouble by leaving us. Bob and I discussed the recruiting of a couple of porters, so whenever we saw people looking like porters, we asked them if they would like to come with us. In the shed we saw two elderly looking people cooking food by burning grass roots. They looked very strong and quite pleasant. As usual, I asked if they would like to be our porters. After a few questions, as to how much we would pay and where we were going, they agreed to come with us, without bargaining. As a matter of fact they were heading along the same route as we were. These people lived in Mukat, on of the extreme eastern villages of the Dolpo region and knew all the routes which we were proceeding. They spoke very little Nepali and communication was quite difficult. They were from the Sherpa community and of entirely Tibetan stock. When I asked their ages, I was surprised to learn that one who looked in his late forties, was only in his early twenties. The older one, whose name was Nima, had attracted my attention by his good knowledge of the area and his happy appearance. Nima was stocky, about five foot five inches tall, wearing Tibetan dress and boots. But his "bakhu" the thick robe which tumbled down from the waist, showed a dirty checked thick flannel shirt. His cheeks were quite soft and clean and without a beard, but he had a thin, long, wispy moustache drooping sideways, as well as frontward. His nose was always running and each time he wiped it on his sleeve like a child. He spoke constantly, no matter who was listening to him. On the whole his personality gave a picture of an over-grown child, but quite sincere.

We camped early today and as the day had not yet begun to close, Bob decided to go out "birding". John sat comfortably on a big rock watching the rocky cliffs on the other side of Shen Khola with the hope of seeing himalayan thar *Hemitragus jamlahica*, as the area looked a very good habitat for this goat antelope. I was very hungry due to my inadequate dry lunch, so I made myself busy in the kitchen, also asking Lal

Bahadur to prepare the food as soon as possible— my favourite dal-bhat. After a while Bob happily came back with one bird to add to his collection. It was a white breasted dipper *Cinclus cinclus*. He had collected it from the stream of Shen Khola. This bird dips into rushing water for its catch. Bob said that it was migratory bird found in the Trans-Himalayan region. It has a characteristic white breast on a chocolate brown body. The feathers are blackish. This bird nests on the ledges of cliffs near mountain streams. The tail and wings continuously flutter restlessly. I was beginning to learn more about birds and Bob inspired me a lot.

Next morning I got up quite early and immediately after tea I followed Bob, leaving John and the porters behind and asking them to meet us somewhere further up. The trail higher up was completely covered by grass. The slope was gentle, but the climbing was quite difficult. We observed that our breathing was laboured, not because of the steep trail, but because of the high altitude. Our altimeter was reading high at 14,600 feet. After some time we looked back at our party which was advancing along a different route way down below. They passed quite a distance ahead of us and we realised that we had climbed for an hour unnecessarily. I ran down along the gentle contours of the velvet grasslands to catch them. The sensation of running down at this high altitude was almost like flying; so exhilarating and so easy.

Approaching the pass of the high basin of Shen Khola we saw the whole horizon covered with a thick mat of snow. I liked to see the permanent snowland. I waited for one of my porters and asked him to take out my long-awaited leather boots, which had worried me so much and which I had carried such a long way. I was not used of walking with heavy boots but I was quite happy to wear them for the psychological confidence needed in snow. I walked ahead smartly. The pass was long and known

as the "Purbang Pass." All the porters walked with the same boots that we had given them, but Nima's boots were so worn and old that every few steps he kneeled down to remove the powdery snow from his shoes; yet still he was smiling. After crossing our first major pass, we decided to celebrate that evening. Fortunately, we found some shepherds from whom we bought a fairly good sized goat for forty rupees. It had been a few days since the porters and we had eaten any fresh meat. The evening proved one of the most pleasurable halts of our trek. In the middle of the night I had a slight headache as a result of altitude sickness. I took some aspirin and was keen to know who else had a headache. There were four Kathmandu porters who also complained of this ailment; I was a little relieved to know that I wasn't the only one who had it.

The next day also dawned clear and the morning glow of the sun opened up the splendid Purbang landscape—there were thickly grassed meadows with silvery patches of snow, rolling up and down from the criss-crossing of gentle mountains. The area looked so solitary and remote, and one of the most suitable habitats for high altitude wild animals. We could easily guess there must be blue sheep somewhere here. All of us were looking far and near with our binoculars searching for animals. Perhaps we could find the "shyest cat," the snow leopard. As the day was sunny, nature was tempting our curiosity to explore the wild-life. We decided to wait for lunch—Lal Bahadur was quite happy to cook with the remaining goat meat of last night. It was still very fresh because of the intensely cold climate. After the early morning walk, I came back to the camp and rested inside my tent, sipping tea from a mug. It was lovely to look outside from my tent—all those naked mountains. They were as beautiful as a shapely naked women devoid of make-up and attire to cover her natural gifted beauty.

My gazing outside and day dreams were disturbed when I

saw two wondering Tibetan girls about nine or ten years old staring at me. They looked like twins. They smiled and sat in front of my tent. They were warmly huddled in thick Tibetan dresses called "bakhu." These girls may not have seen white men like my two friends with such equipment before. They looked so puzzled. I took out my camera to clean out the moisture. After doing this I took their picture just out of fun. At that time they were smiling. Lale, who was making lunch, drove them away from the tent. The moment they disappeared, my memory of them vanished. This insignificant incident was completely closed for the next three years of my life as I came across this kind of people very often. But the story did not end here and came up again as a hilarious meeting three years later in Kathmandu.

One day, I was showing my picture album of this expedition to my Tibetan friend who runs a restaurant at Kathmandu Guest House. He had a small baby for whom he had engaged a young tibetan girl as governess. I had known her since she was appointed and I talked with her quite often; she was dark and fat and frequently wore jeans. At the time I was showing my album, she was standing next to us and was also looking at my photo album. With great difficulty, she asked me very slowly, in perfect Nepali, from where all these pictures had come. Surprised, I said that they were from Dolpo. For her Dolpo was unknown. The world of the local people of her region extends as far as a few near-by villages. Her curiosity was aroused and she slowly asked me if I had ever been to the Himal, the land where they lived. My friend, who was surprised by these many questions coming from his daughter's governess, frowned and asked her in Tibetan, "Why?" Shyly and nervously she said "Karna sahib's album has a picture of my sister and myself." I was unaware of what she was saying, but all of a sudden a strange feeling came to me that I had seen this girl somewhere before. Deeply breathing she showed us her picture with great

excitement and happiness flashed across her face. There was indeed a big change in this girl, but she was the same one who was watching me as an intruder in her confined world. I was flabbergasted and speechless, not because her appearance and style had changed, but by how the incident had brought us together. I could never imagine that the tiny, wild looking girl I had met way up in the mountains in a completely different association and whose picture I took for no reason, could happen to be the governess of my friend's daughter. I had often seen her in the last six months, but I had never recognised her. She also could never imagine that I was the same stranger who was unkempt, wearing loose, dirty clothes, with a wild moustache and beard, dark sunburned face and balaclava cap covering my whole head and neck. This was one strange incident, not of great importance, but a remarkable memory of my trek. I still can't believe how on earth people happen to meet each other at such an unpredicable time and place.

After lunch we packed and found that three Tibetan porters wanted to go back home. In fact we were all quite fed-up with these people, as they always argued about the smallest thing and we were quite relieved that they wanted to go back to Dhorpatan. By now we were in a position to be able to lose one or two porters, as the weight of our rations and provisions had been reduced. So the Tibetans' decision didn't create any problem. We had already recruited two Sherpas at Shen Khola.

Today we were scheduled to reach one of the biggest settlements of the Dolpo region. The name of the village was Tarakot. It seemed quite large and important as it was centrally located in the district. Everyone talked of it quite a lot, especially our porters who were very enthusiastic to reach Tarakot and replenish their rations there. From the map it didn't look such a long journey, as it was situated at a lower altitude than this pass. We were disappointed not to see even a single wild animal or bird

on the trail in this seemingly good habitat. But we proceeded happily, knowing that night we would stay in Tarakot village.

At about one o'clock, my stomach suddenly started to ache. I hadn't been able to relieve myself that morning and generally during a trek my toilet timetable is not regular as I know that I can use any place along the trek at any time. The pain increased and I felt the need to go at once. I was looking for a suitable place but the whole land was on an uneven slope. I couldn't wait any longer so I squatted, balancing my body uncomfortably. I stayed there for a long time but the pain didn't subside and only increased. I was sure that dysentery had set in. I saw all the porters and my friends way down the trail; I was still squatting and waiting for the pain to pass, but it didn't. The distance between my friends and myself was increasing so I had to hurry. I rose and tied up my short pants but within ten more steps I was compelled to sit again. I sat for a long time but nothing happened and the cramming pressure remained. An hour before I was a perfectly normal, strong man, but now within such a short period I had lost all my energy. Even sitting without holding the branch of a tree was difficult for me. I became rapidly weaker. My body became cold and I was shivering badly. Despite this, my forehead and temple were covered in beads of sweat. It was terrible. I couldn't see any sign of my porters they just disappeared to the other valley, and I still had such a long distance to catch up. It was impossible for me to continue in such bad shape. Finally, I realised that sitting and getting up again and again was not a solution and that it only created more discomfort. Just to relieve and forget my agony and embarrassing pain, I slept stretched out on the grasslands and tried to concentrate my whole mind into a state of sleep. I rested completely for an hour, tolerating and preventing myself from going to the toilet. After this I felt a little relieved and had recuperated sufficient energy to walk down slowly towards Tarakot.

With tremendous difficulty I arrived in Tarakot almost at dusk. Everyone was surprised by my sudden change in health; my face was flushed to a pale. I asked one of the Gurung porters to pitch my tent. I took four tablets of enterovioform and two sleeping pills all at a time. I didn't want to take any food at all, but drank some tea and then collapsed inside my sleeping bag. We think we are so strong, but we are so vulnerable to even small infections.



CHAPTER FOUR

CIVILIZATION AROUND BARBUNG AND SULIGAD RIVERS

“DOOR TO HEAVEN”

Wilderness is part of a geography of hope. It is a commodity, we make use of even when we are not in it, its existence makes New York or Oakland more tolerable, because we know that there is something else.”

Wallace Stegner

From now on, I was very concerned about my food, although I don't think the main cause of my dysentery was food poisoning, as I knew I hadn't eaten food or drunk any river water along the way. Generally, when the upper portions of low hillside regions are inhabited by villagers, the water in the running streams is often contaminated, even though it looks very clean and inviting. I was quite careful, as I had similar attacks on previous treks. I tried to analyse what could have been the cause. I could guess at only two possibilities. One was recurrence of dormant bacteria from which I had suffered a couple of times a long time before. The other was based on what I believe from the old people's sayings. According to them, when a person is exposed to wet weather and sits in the damp for a length of time, the lumbar region is affected by the cold and muscular pressure, cramping and dysentery sets in. They believe that the best way to cure this is to put hot-water bottles on the lumbar region, or to massage the entire lower portion of the back with mustard oil after first heating the hands over a fire. I followed the latter cure. By noon I came back in good shape and after having lunch I was careful not to sit in damp places. I took out my sleeping bag and from now on I would cover the rocks I sat on.

We decided to stay one more night here. Two of the remaining Tibetan porters also left us to return to Dhorpatan. All the porters except Lal Bahadur Tamang went to houses of Tarakot to buy their food. The village was low down from our camp site. After walking a little further, a bird's eye view of Tarakot came into my field of vision.



Tarakot is a fairly large village compared to any of the others we had encountered during the last week's trek. Seventy or eighty houses were tightly jammed on a north-west facing mountain. The houses were generally of two stories, with a front porch used as a balcony. The construction of these houses was of local conglomerates and clay. Some of the houses were completely made by piling up stones and then plastering them over with mud. They had no windows, only a main entrance. But the new houses were made of wooden poles interwoven with bamboo reeds and grass and were plastered with mud. Every house had a flat roof covered with hard clay. The edges

of the roofs were held with well-placed broad stone slates, so that when it rained, the edges wouldn't be washed away. The outside walls were decorated profusely with daubs of white paint. The people were composed of Gurungs and Tamangs. The ladies wore saris and "Cholows" (blouses) in typical Gurung fashion. They were very fond of ornaments and many of them wore nose rings, huge, heavy round low-quality gold earrings and many imitation coral beads. There were few Tibetan style people. Many of the families engaged in business looked quite prosperous. This village can be taken as the metropolitan centre for the whole Dolpo region. The people visited Pokhara or Baglung once or twice a year to collect merchandise and stock for selling. People from the northern areas of Dolpo such as Ringmo, Mukut and Pungmo came here to buy these goods.

The villagers here were very fond of dogs and in many houses, I saw beautiful Tibetan mastiffs. Most of them looked beautifully ferocious like wolves with fluffy fur, bushy tails and huge bodies, just like their fore-fathers. Their deep "oil drum," barks were continuously heard in this valley.

Down below in the valley flowed the Barbung Khola, from the Mukut Himal catchment area. The roar of the Barbung Khola, which joins the big Suligad river and then forms the Bheri river after its confluence, could be heard from 1,500 feet above the river bed. The flank of the mountain aspect of Tarakot ended in a blind spur. On the top of this spur a monastery was perched. From far off one could see that the monastery must be a big one and numerous Buddhist prayer flags were fluttering in the wind. Above the village was a blue pine forest *Pinus wallichiana*; unfortunately the forest near the village was almost completely destroyed.

After walking a little I felt dizzy and weak and came back to the camp where a number of villagers had surrounded the camp site. They asked many questions about our visit and were all

very curious. They hadn't seen many trekkers before, but they knew who we were. I was quite interested in one middle-aged man who appeared to have a good knowledge of the area. We offered him cigarettes and tea and as usual asked a lot of questions about wild life. He told me some very interesting stories from his wealth of knowledge about the Dolpo region, both far and near. The most interesting was his story about the Yeti. He strongly believed in the existence of this abominable snowman. He believed that they were very fond of girls and young children. His father told him that in his time the Yeti had kidnapped some. They were not cannibals and were very shy; they always kept away from human but if human confronted them they did not hesitate to kill them. His description of the Yeti, passed down from his father was quite similar to what I have heard in other areas. Yetis were heavier than a man and completely covered with long hair. They had long hands and four prominent round toes. What I found new from him about this controversial topic of the Yeti was the existence of two types : Chuthe and Mithe. Chuthe lived near isolated water streams and fed on water plants and fishes, whereas Mithe was a land Yeti, living on the fringe of forest areas and eating plants and roots. Listening to his stories of the Yeti, I didn't want to argue with him, as they were part of the beautiful mountain folk-lore which I didn't want to spoil.

The Yeti, though I don't believe in its existence, has always attracted me by its myths and legends. The legend behind the *raison d'etre* of the Yeti attached to the Hindu community is very interesting. There was a hero named Dronacharya, famed in the myths of the Mahabharat, whose death was possible only after shedding tears from his eyes. Then Krishna, the great conspirator, killed an elephant whose name was the same as that of Dronacharya's son, Asosthama. On the battlefield of Kuruchhetra the rumour was spread that Asosthama was dead. But the great warrior did not believe the rumour and kept on

killing huge numbers of soldiers of Pandava, whom Lord Krishna was backing. He believed only one man in the world, Udhisthir, the eldest brother of Pandava and who represented absolute truth. Udhisthir told Dronacharya that Asosthama was dead, without mentioning whether it was the man or the elephant. Believing Udhisthir, sudden tears on the compassion felt at his son's death filled Dronacharya's eyes. In the meantime, Arjuna shot an arrow from his bow on Krishna's command, striking Dronacharya fatally. Asosthama, roused with anger at Pandava's conspiracy to kill his great father vowed to take revenge on them. At the end of the great Kuruchhetra war, Duryodhan, the opposing leader, lay on the battlefield, his whole body shattered. Death had not yet come to him, as this was only possible after the fulfilment of his great wish. Asosthama, the son of Dronacharya came near to the savaged body of Duryodhan and asked if he could fulfil his last wish for him. Duryodhan requested him to get the heads of the five brothers of Pandava; this would fulfil his last wish and allow him to die peacefully. Asosthama promised him this, as it would also give him revenge for his father's death. On the other hand, Krishna, the great clairvoyant, found out and told Pandava's five brothers to flee, without giving them any reasons and asked the five sons of the brothers to sleep in their room. In the pitch dark of the night, Asosthama entered the room and mistakenly chopped off the heads of the five sons; packing them in a bed sheet, he brought them to Duryodhan. Seeing the heads of five innocent boys, he lamented and wouldn't ask Asosthama again to kill the five brothers of Pandava, as they were the only living persons of the great family of Pandava and Kourava, the family of the two brothers. Their lives became very important for the ritual cremation of all the hundreds of dead brothers and families on the battlefield. He requested Asosthama to give up any revengeful thoughts for the killing of Pandava. This would now be his last wish. Asosthama grieved mightily that he had killed the

innocent boys and that his revenge had not been fulfilled. He headed north to live in the solitude of the Himalayas for evermore. Many Hindu legend-lovers believe that Asosthama lived with some mountain people or apes and produced offspring by them, whom are now called Yeti.

This man knew quite a lot about wild animals in the area and his descriptions were vivid. He said that the "Sarkain" (snow leopard), *Panthera uncia* was like a "bagh", that is, forest leopard *Panthera pardus* and that it was very gentle and not notorious. They never came to snatch cattle, goats, or children from the village. They also never came to a trap as easily as did "bagh." They were white, with black spots. He said that "Sarkain" loved to wander all the time and seldom had one home. "Sarkain" liked mountain hare very much, as well as baby wild goats and sheep. On my asking where we could find them, he said that if we were lucky, we could see Sarkain beyond the Phoksondu and Shey areas. They were also found in the Mukut Gaon (village). A couple of years ago, some Gurung Shikaris of that village killed a snow leopard and tied the dead body to a pole. Then they went from one house to another asking money or food stuffs as a reward. They said that by killing the "bagh", (snow leopard), they had protected the villages' domestic stock. I was very shocked to hear this incident which show the villager's ignorance and psychological misunderstanding of this animal.

He knew quite a lot about the habitat of other animals as well. He gave us an exact picture of the habitat of himalayan thar, blue sheep and others. I was very happy to talk to him. Sometimes this kind of information is very necessary in order for us to guess the distribution and habitat of the wild animals as well as the hunting pressure and the carrying capacity of the area. I requested him to come with us as a guide, but he was too busy in the fields with his new crop.

When all the porters returned to camp everyone was carrying

loadfuls of rations. Now I could see another problem coming up with the porters. The Tibetan porters had returned to Dhorpatan and the additional weight meant we were three or four porters too short. I was a little upset with the remaining porters who were carrying more of their own provisions than our load. But how could I object?—they had to eat and they had to live. Nobody knew if food was available further up. So for humanity's sake I kept my mouth shut. I asked all the villagers if anyone would like to join us as porters, but nobody was willing. They didn't want to miss the once yearly occasion to sow their crops during the monsoon.

After a light dinner, I went to bed without worrying about the problem of porters. If I didn't find any tomorrow, it would give me one more day's rest.

Next morning I was woken by Lal Bahadur it was very late—almost nine o'clock. I had spent a peaceful night and Lale with his high pitched voice offered me some tea saying "sahib, chiya; sahib chiya!" I lazily replied "O.K." Suddenly he jerked up the tent and opened it wide. The day was so clear that the morning sun was blazing: I was dazzled and covered my eyes with my forearm. Screwing my eyes up I drank the tea and asked Lale if any villagers had wished to join us. He said "no." I came out of the tent stretching my muscles. I felt great and relaxed and happy that I was completely relieved from any pain or weakness.

John appeared from the bush holding a partridge in his hand. He said proudly: "I just went out to collect something good for the breakfast menu." Bob identified the bird as a tibetan partridge *Perdix hodgsoniae*. Its local name is "telerapa." John said he shot it near a bushy area. There was a flock of four or five but he could shoot only one. It was a drab, colourless game bird of the size of a large pigeon. Its wings were speckled with black and brown. Its front abdomen was quite black. To have

game bird meat for breakfast was indeed most luxurious. Lale fried the partridge meat and served it to us. The meat was tough but tasty, although the preparation was far from the gourmet technique. Lale asked how his dish was. Bob said "It's the meat which tastes good". Lale never understood Bob's real meaning'. I tired only a small piece of meat as I was still scared to take any solid food. When breakfast was over we were still waiting for new porters to join us. We checked all the luggage and rations and found we still needed at least two or three more porters. I asked Lale and all the porters if the excess weight could be adjusted amongst the remaining porters. It looked very difficult as one load would weigh sixtyfive to seventy pounds. There seemed no hope of getting any porters from this area.

I went down to check if a Panchayat man or the police people could help us. Someone pointed out the police check-post, which was just like an ordinary family house. I went inside and climbed the very narrow staircase. There was a dark-skinned man wearing a white shirt, striped pyjama and a black Nepali cap. I recognized him at once as one of the police staff. He introduced himself as an assistant subinspector in charge of the Tarakot area. He seemed quite friendly and politely offered me a seat. I inquired about porters and if he could help us to get someone. He nodded his head to indicate that he would try. He called someone and quickly a well uniformed policeman came. For the first time in my life, I saw a typically Tibetan working as a policeman. I was quite impressed by his discipline and clean khaki uniform. Of course it wasn't pressed. His long hair was plaited with red ribbon and wound around his head: I could see part of the ribbon protuding from underneath his scout cap. He was quite young and spoke very little Nepali. The assistant subinspector asked if he could go to the village houses and find at least three porters to accompany us. He stood at attention all the time and stamped his right foot to indicate affirmation to each question. The inspector seemed

very pleased with his assistant's discipline. I requested the Tibetan Nepalese policeman to let me take some pictures of him. He was very glad to pose for me and jumped to the open porch and stood like a statue, peering at my camera very seriously with his tiny Mongoloid eyes. I asked him to smile and relax a little. The subinspector stood next to him and taught him how to pose. He himself was quite conscious of my camera, and didn't move away. He was continuing to grin at me. I felt bad to ask him step aside so I focused my camera on the young policeman. I'm sure the inspector thought he would appear very gracious in the picture.

The young policeman finally brought three porters who had just arrived from Tarap village. One of them was an attractive Tibetan girl in her early twenties. I was so glad to have them as it meant we could start our journey early tomorrow morning. Once a person has started a trek and is moving and has to go to a far off destination, even a slight impediment to progress is not welcomed.

Next morning, we appointed the girl, whose name was Angmo, as our "kitchen-boy". Her job was to carry the stoves, cooking pots, plates and cutlery, and basic food requirements for each day. Nobody objected to this appointment: in fact, everyone was really happy to have the company of a nice looking young girl.

We descended to the Barbung Khola and walked along a narrow trail. The forest here was thinly covered and was composed of low quality deodar *Cedrus deodara*. It was rare to see this species in Nepal, as it is a western Himalayan species. Looking at the uniform deodar forest in this area, one could guess that this lower valley of the Barbung Khola might at one time have contained a good deodar forest, but now it was being replaced probably because of biological factors such as burning and cutting.

Our trail then passed over a narrow bridge and followed the other bank. Travelling down by the river, we didn't realize that we were losing height. When we arrived at lower Dunie we checked the scale and found to our surprise that we were at less than 8,000 feet. The confluence of the Barbung Khola and Suligad river flowing from the other side of the valley is the beginning of the great Bheri river.

Dunie is the administrative head quarter for the Dolpo region. It is smaller than Tarakot, but entirely different in orientation. Dunie is situated in a long valley on the left bank of the upper Bheri river. Lower Dunie is the old village where many of the inhabitants live and upper Dunie is about one furlong further up from it where there are schools, health centre, checkpost and P. D. O.'s Office. We arrived in Dunie quite early and decided to stay one night near the school area. The school was closed. I didn't know why. The P. D. O.'s Office and all the government offices situated next to each other. All the buildings were quite new and of one storey. Upper Dunie was very dry and completely full of slatey rocks and sandy soil. I went to see the P. D. O. who was a young man and quite friendly. He was the same P. D. O. whose wife had been stricken with frostbite. He also told me the same story as the constable had and I was quite curious to see his wife's feet. After a while this pretty, soft-looking woman, much younger than her husband brought tea for us. My eyes quickly ran to her feet, but they were covered by her sari. I asked his reaction on returning to this remote land after the mishap, he just smiled and said, "Well, this is my duty".

At about four o'clock, the P. D. O. sent someone to invite me to join in a game of volley-ball. There I met four very young boys from Kathmandu who had been appointed here to do a population census for the Department of Statistics. The Department sent them on a temporary basis paying them four hundred rupees per months, which was absolutely insufficient for the

work they were doing in such a remote land. On their return to Kathmandu, they would have no employment security. Their condition was poor; they didn't have enough food to eat and they were doing a tremendous job. They had to do family as well as individual census requiring them to walk up and down for days with no previous experience, nor any medical facilities. Talking with them, I found out that they didn't know anything about altitude sickness, pneumonia, dysentery, etc. When they came here, they had no idea what it would be like; now they looked tired and homesick, but they were sportive. I joined them in playing volley ball for a while. It was quite windy and the ball (as their mind and mood) flew in a different direction to which it was hit.

I didn't return to my tent until late as the P.D.O. and all the boys were anxious to talk with me and to hear news from Kathmandu. I would have felt guilty to go back early and disappoint them by curtailing my visit. In fact the P. D. O. and his wife had arrived in Dunie quite recently from Kathmandu. They had taken the route from Nepalgunj and followed the Bheri river from there. The P. D. O. said that they would never go back to those high passes.

Next morning (the sixth of June), we left our camp after morning tea. While Lal Bahadur went down to the river he saw a four foot long green snake on the way. We called Bob to identify the snake. He rushed back and grabbed the tail of the snake, pulling it out of the bush. Holding the tail very tightly he turned it around in circles so that the snake couldn't lift its head up and bite him. After that he gently threw it back into the bush, saying it was a *Hodson racer* belonging to the non-poisonous group.

The Suligad is about three times bigger than Barbung Khola. From now on we had to follow the route towards the basin of this

river. The bridge was constructed across a narrow part of the river. It was extraordinarily built over a span of about sixty or seventy feet. On both sides of the bank, a very strong wall of huge blocks of rock was raised slightly at an inclined angle away from the river. Deeply embedded into each wall were three layers of long solid wooden poles, extending towards each other across the river. On the top of these embedded struts, other long poles were resting, joining the gap between the struts on each side. There was no railing; the three bridge surface poles were bound together by ropes and soft soil was padded down on them to make a smooth trail. On the whole, the bridge looked very massive, but once someone arrived in the middle of it, he could feel the poles shaking and vibrating against the tremendous flow of the water. The trail from here passed along the eastern bank of the Suligad river on a different contour level. Most of the mountains were barren and steep. But as we headed toward the north, vegetation covered most of the landscape within a close gap of the valley. The catchment area of this Suligad river was very distinct, long and narrow. When we walked along the higher contours, the Suligad looked tiny as it was embedded so deeply in the bottom of the valley.

Approaching Roho village, we saw a completely different landscape. It was a moist valley, thickly covered with beautiful forests of wall nut *Juglans regia* and maples *Acer aesium*. The whole surroundings, with these broad leaf species were a lively green. The village was virtually situated under the thick cover of forest. It was inhabited by Magars. Everyone, from children to old people, had a layer of dirt on their faces and necks. The trail in the village was littered with sewerage and covered with flies and maggots. We were quite tired from walking up and down along the open mountain contours and seeing the cool patch of forest, we thought of resting. However it was so dirty, that we were repelled and left as soon as possible. I passed the village without even glancing at it.

From now onwards, the broadleaf forests near Roho village were replaced by beautiful stands of cypress. *Cupressus torulesa*. In some places the uniformity of such beautiful stands was found shattered into a secondary growth of another successive vegetation. It looked as if this area was originally covered predominantly by this species. But as a result of cutting, grazing and burning, the vegetation of cupressus was in the process of slowly being replaced by grasslands and shrubs. In some places overgrazing and burning resulted in the formation of blue pine forest *Pinus wallichiana*. Still, though, the wilderness was preserved in many places. As we went higher up, in some damp places, I also noticed spruce *Picea smithiana*. The cedar tree *Cedrus deodara* which I had seen on the down-hill side of Tarakot, was completely absent from the Suligad valley. On the other side of the valley, the forest looked entirely different. It was difficult to identify but the major composition of the forest on the other side of the river was pine and hemlock. In the entire valley some successional change in the forest ecology, because of climatical as well as biological factors could be noticed under precise vegetational observation, but still the wild atmosphere was well preserved.

The open blue sky was covered with a tall tree canopy, under which there was no obstruction in the middle storey, the only obstruction being at ground level with thick, waist high bushes.

In this peaceful, tranquil atmosphere, I walked ahead, leaving my porters and friends a long way behind. For miles, the pin drop silence was maintained and sometimes, it was broken only by the river's roaring. There was no noise of goats or cattle and no chanting folk songs of wood-cutters. I was just by myself. I was whistling and singing in a loud voice, resting, then walking. I was behaving like a king in a lonely forest. I didn't notice how many ridges, valleys and spure I crossed, but I kept on walking like a happy fawn. I felt no pain or tiredness. Since I

had been walking so far for so many days, my legs had become thin, tough and solid, like a mountain goat's. I felt as if my whole body was as light as air. If I had wings, I could fly. I was really fresh and feeling on top of the world. It was neither very hot, nor cold, as the trail passed through sun and shadows.

I did not know whether I had descended down to the river bed or the Suligad river basin had risen up, however I now found myself walking along the bank of the river. Icy cold water was flowing in torrents, rushing along the boulder filled river bed. The amplified splashing sound of the river against the rocks roared throughout the valley. A little further up, the water channelled into a gorge abridged by three big timber poles cut from spruce trees. The water gushed into the narrow channel forming a spray that made me quite cold.

I realized I had gone too far ahead of the party. My friends were a long way behind and I imagined the porters had a very long way to come. It was already three o'clock, so I knew I should not go further up. Besides this, it was marvellous place for camping. Since there was also good rock shelter for the porters, I waited by the river bank.

After an hour John arrived and Bob followed later with the porters. We would have loved to have such a beautiful camp-site near the river bank, but there was no suitable place. So we pitched our tent at some height from the river. After some time there we found clouds of flies, blood blisters and midges. They were hovering and humming over our heads. It was too late to shift as this was the only place available. Lal Bahadur and all the porters had already got busy cooking their food as everyone was tired and hungry. I was quite worried about the flies and my hand became tired from swatting them away. If I looked at my leg, the flies bit my ear lobe and if I was concerned with my head, they bit my leg. It was really awful. I applied insect repellent

on all my exposed flesh, but it didn't stop them. Finally, I went down to the river bed and sat on the middle of the bridge. The cold breeze from the gushing water drove them away. There was not a single fly here and I was relieved for a while, but the moist breeze made me shiver with cold. I decided to stay on the middle of the bridge, rather than be bitten by blood-blister flies and midges, but it was difficult to stay there for very long. I was chilled to the bone. I put on my heavy sweater, wind breaker warm pants and stayed there until dinner was ready. Nima said that the blood-blister flies would be inactive during the night, so I was impatiently waiting for the moment when I could go back to the camp site. As dusk was approaching, Lal Bahadur and some porters built a camp fire. Nima was right, there were no more flies now. Slowly the dark night inside the forest was brightened by silvery moonlight. The full moon was so prominent in the open sky that we could see the shadows cast by the branches of the trees. The silhouetted impression of jungle moved very slowly and its perfect light up the tents and people's faces in turn, in what proved to be one of the most romantic nights of our trek.

John and I had some whiskey. I added icy cold mountain water to the whiskey which was just as good as blocks of ice. John added water from his water bottle which had been chlorinated. He was quite worried about hygiene, but I thought that mountain water at such an altitude was as pure as water could be. I told John that he was really missing the true taste of natural water. Bob never drinks hard liquor so he always replaced these drinks either with coffee or tea. There was no lemonade or ginger-ale for him here, but he was clever, as he had brought packets of dried grenadine and other fruits which he mixed with water, they tasted really good.

The night was very pleasant. All the porters were happy and were singing many kinds of folk-songs, some of which

were good, but most of them were really noisy. All the porters were quite keen for Angmo to sing but she didn't want to utter even a single word. She wasn't shy, but I guessed that she didn't know how to sing. I looked at her in the glow of the flickering fire, the dirt vanished, her pale face brightened into a rosy colour I wondered if this was Angmo I was looking at. Sitting by the camp fire, she became warm and removed the top part of her dress. She was wearing just a white, thin, cotton undershirt, under which her youthful form was distinctly revealed. Everybody could easily see her breasts and distinct nipples against the thin material of her blouse. She was unaware of all the people watching her; she looked very sexy and her voluptuous beauty especially attracted the teenage Gurung boy. I was watching his fondness toward this girl grow from the day she joined us. I could see his happiness and intentions this evening. But she had no interest in him; her expressions were quite uniniting. He often tried to be near her and this evening also he had sat next to her. His eyes were running continuously over her round breasts and he was constantly forcing her to sing.

I could not help myself from admiring her sexy figure which was exposed by the warm glow of the fire and the silvery rays of the moonlight night. She stretched out her hands to the fire to shield her eyes from the bright glow and her red glass bangles tinkled against one another. She was slowly attracting me. For the first time, I asked her a personal question. I enquired how she managed to sleep amongst all these male porters in a small place. She laughed loudly and said "It's simple, I just sleep between them". "Don't you feel awkward to sleep like that?" I asked with curiosity. She said plainly, "Why? If someone did anything I would squeeze his balls". I was horrified to hear such dirty and frank language from her which I had never in my life heard from any Nepalese girl. These words disenchanted me and the beautiful impression of her in my mind quickly faded. Her words received no reaction from the porters; perhaps they were

used to hearing this kind of language from her. Lal Bahadur, who was quite clever, held his ear lobes with his hands and exclaimed as if he were very surprised, "Ammama mou ! Yo keti hoki kichi-kinny ho ! (Mmm, is she a woman or a vampire?) In Nepal, especially in Kathmandu, people use this expression frequently for sadist girls. There is a very popular folk tale connected with the "kichi-kinny" who is said to be a man-hunting ghost lady. She is supposed to be very beautiful but can't speak and can only yelp like a monkey. Her peculiarities are said to be her huge hanging breasts, and her feet which have the heels in front and toes behind. There were many stories about how this kichi-kinny seduces men, takes them to a solitary place where she kills them by tickling. The kichi-kinny is a sadist, taking pleasure in giving torture and enjoying the man's giggling. It is also believed by old people that the kichi-kinny is the abused next generation of a whore. Some also believe that when nymphomaniacs die, their souls roam the night in the form of a kichi-kinny.

In connection with this I would like to tell one of the oral traditions about kichi-kinny which I heard when I was young and which still thrills me. It runs like this. Not very long ago, when my father was a young boy, he had an uncle of about forty years old. This man was supposed to be quite adventurous at that time. He roamed around with a rowdy gang, who were not scared of anyone and spent most of their time roaming the night in graveyards and cremation grounds, wanting to encounter ghosts and witches. The leader's name was Hakcha, and many people were afraid of him. One day he heard about the kichi-kinny in a locality called Ombahal, north of Kathmandu. He wanted to catch her and made a plan to follow her while his friends would secretly shadow him; if he had any difficulties, he would call out and all his friends would come to rescue him. They tried their luck and one night they got her as planned.

He saw a most beautiful lady standing and inviting him, wearing a shawl thrown round her shoulders. At first he mistook her for a real lady. He wanted to hold her, but she jumped away like a gazelle and walked fast into the silvery moon-lit night. Sometimes she looked back and smiled, inviting Hakacha to follow her. He realized that she was definitely a kichi-kinny. His heart was thumping with fear and he wanted to run away, but his prestige, as an adventurous gang leader, forced him to



follow her hesitantly. His four or five friends also followed him, holding hands, with high expectations about what would happen. Hakacha followed her for about half an hour and on arrival at a cremation area, on the river bank, the kichi-kinny stopped and extended her hand to invite him, unfolding her shawl. He saw her pendulous breasts and was scared to death, but didn't lose his courage to hold her. He held her very powerfully before she could start tickling him and called his friends to come

quickly. All his loyal friends ran and grabbed her with more strength than they had ever exerted in their lives. She was terribly strong and tried to break their holds but they were all strong men and wouldn't let her go. They held her down all night and when the first rays of dawn appeared all they found was a charred log. They were astonished at this unbelievable transformation.

They consulted an old astrologer about this happening, and on his command they split the log with an axe. To their great surprise, blood spurted out from the middle and with each blow a strange tiny yelping sound followed. The astrologer told them to burn every splinter of the log and after that, no one ever heard of a kichi-kinny in the Ombahal locality again. The astrologer guessed that the log might have been used for burning in the cremation pyre of a beautiful nymphomaniac girl. The cremation party might have returned home before the whole body was burnt and due to rain or some other reason, the fire might have been extinguished. As a result of the incompleteness of the cremation, the nymphomaniac's soul had entered into a log. In Nepal cremation must be total, and every piece of wood must be completely burned.

Lal Bahadur's comment on the kichi-kinny had no effect on Angmo as she had never heard about this witch in her life. She was still stretching her hands out to the fire to protect her face from the burning heat. She looked quite like an innocent tigress but if she had known his meaning, I'm sure she would have been ready to jump at him.

I passed a dreamless night and when I got up in the morning breakfast was ready. For a few days now we had been having breakfast, as generally we took brunch. I am usually allergic to breakfast, especially to lumpy porridge, dry chapattis and tinned powdered eggs. Breakfast for me means nothing except mugs of tea. All the porters took their lunch early in the morning, so that at lunch time we stopped only for tea and biscuits. The

result was that I became very hungry in the day time where as for John and Bob, they took so much breakfast that they survive a whole day without food. After breakfast, we proceeded north again along the Suligad river. About a mile's walk later we came to a beautiful small valley called Chepka. The forest in this region was quite dense with blue pine *Pinus walichiana* mixed with cupressus *Curpresus torulosa*. The middle storey was populus and the ground storey was full of bamboo. The whole picture gave an impression of a good habitat of himalayan black bear and barking deer. Walking through these different layers of forest, we heard a lot of birds calling, especially the continuous chirping of black tits and warblers. Frequently a notchach called like a baby whimpering. Bob thought it was a white checked notchach *Sitta leucopsis*.

Now we were heading inside the most beautiful forest of cupressus. The gigantic cupressus were uniformly scattered in a wide spacing. Most of them were about a hundred feet in height. The girth of a big tree was almost twenty two feet. There was not much regeneration of cupressus, but the ground was predominantly covered by many species of ferns. On the way, the sky blackened swiftly and rain poured down heavily, so we stopped in the shade near a mountain stream for lunch. After lunch the weather cleared and sun appeared in the partly covered blue sky. The sun rays were so powerful that the porters could dry their clothes quickly. The entire trail that we followed since Dunie was ecstatically superb and it was sufficiently wide enough for horse riding. If there had been a STOL (a six passenger aircraft) service in Dunie, the whole trek would have been one of the most successful sections for mule outfitting safaris.

We didn't realize that we had walked so fast along this beautiful trail, enjoying our time lost in the wonders of nature. We would have gone quite far, but the porters were lagging far behind. John wanted to move ahead. Bob and I suggested to him to wait for the porters to come and then decide whether to

advance or to camp. As I guessed they arrived very late and the question of advancing did not arise. It was quite essential to consider the porters carrying fifty–sixty pounds and eating very basic food. Besides that, to move fast in such a beautiful place is to miss out on so much. In these wild remote lands, where there are many interesting things waiting for the careful observers and where we cannot return again and again, we must take our time to see as much as possible. Thus, I really appreciated Bob's way of trekking. His eyes were always open for the splendid aspects of nature; insects, birds, animals and plant life. No wonder this habit made him Nepal's foremost naturalist.

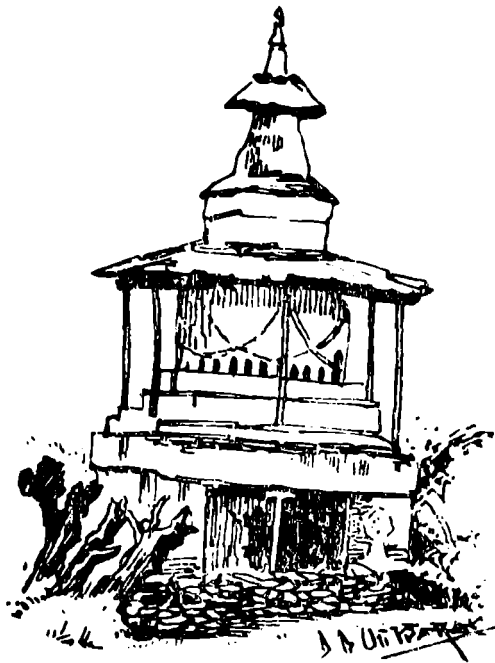
The Gurung porter, who was the naughtiest of all, brought a brightly coloured small snake hanging over a stick to the camp. It was about one foot long. He was joking with Angmo, holding the snake near her face. The girl yelled out of fright and ran from one place to another. The rest of the porters were enjoying this practical joke. The head of the snake was smashed and he tied the neck with a small thread to the stick. Bob was quite surprised—it was a poisonous snake, a Himalayan viper. Bob put it very cautiously in a bottle to preserve it. The Gurung boy was flattered that his contribution had been appreciated and looked at Angmo with a broad smile.

The camp proved to be one of the most superb sites and moreover it could be very interesting as it offered a few interesting side trips. We looked at the map and decided to stay in our camp for one more night. From here we could go to Pungmo valley. The Pungmo river flows from the western region, and from the east the Boligad river, which drains out from Phoksondu lake and joins together to form the Suligad. Our camp was very near to the confluence. After an early breakfast, John and I took a packed lunch and put it in our haversacks. I hung my water bottle at my waist and checked my rucksack for all necessary things. I took a few more rolls of film along.

Since we had commenced our trek I had finished about six rolls of black and white film and now I had only six more rolls left. We still had a long way to go, travelling the most anticipated, interesting and challenging areas of my country. From now on I would have to choose my photos carefully. Trekking in these animated laps of nature I wished I had a few rolls of colour film so that I could capture the natural colour of this wonderful land. For Nepalese, colour film is always a luxury, and is not easily available in Kathmandu. If we get it, processing is another headache. It has to be sent abroad and many people complain of losing parcels of film. So for all these reasons, I was not ready to face the risks at such a high cost. How can a person earning Rs. 700/- per month buy a film costing seventy rupees to which is added the heavy cost of processing. Anyway, I was quite content with my black and white pictures, on which my imagination painted the original colours.

We did not take any porter with us on this side-trip so John and I were heavily hung with cameras and binoculars. Bob decided to stay back in the camp for bird watching. We crossed the river on a huge pole. Walking through an opulent wilderness, we headed for Pungmo village. It was on the northern bank of the river. The water of the Pungmo was very grey and muddy compared to the Bouligad river. The valley along the river sometimes narrowed and sometimes widened. Approaching Pungmo village, it opened up to become a large grazing land where dozens of yak were grazing and small children were playing. All of a sudden they saw us and quickly ran to greet us. They were all quite interested in our cameras and binoculars, and were talking amongst themselves in their own language that these were the things that took photos. Some of the smart boys came near to us and peered at the lenses. I took off my binoculars and held it to one of the boy's eyes. He became quite nervous and was unable to see anything through them. All the boys, as well as the adults, asked the boy most enthusiastically

“what can you see ?”. He tried hard to see, screwing up his eyes, but all he could see was the reflection of his own eye lashes. An elderly man came and pushed the boy out of the way, putting his own eyes to the binoculars. At first, he couldn’t make out anything either. He was endlessly murmuring in his native dialect. Finally, I asked him to take the binoculars from the boy and fixed his head so that his eyes were directed towards the rows of houses on the village side. After a while he figured out what he was looking at and what the objects were. He was amazed suddenly to witness the tiny windows growing so large. He told everyone, laughing and giggling, “what a wonderful object this is !” After that I had problems trying to show all the villagers. None of the children would go near John Blower as they were very shy of him, and just watched from a distance. John just looked back at the wondering children and smiled.



At the up-hill side of the grazing land on the main way to the village there was a big “Chorten”. The chorten is derived from the Buddhist stupa. Its architecture developed from the seated posture of Lord Buddha. It symbolises the steps of enlightenment, leading from worldly misery to spiritual liberation. The basic

structure of chorten consists of a square foundation symbolising the earth, a dome symbolising water and tapering steps symbolising fire. On the top is a stylized parasol symbolising wind. Here the chorten symbolised the gateway back to the village. It was built of stone slabs, and hard clay. It had three layers of flat square roofs, one on top of each storey, and on the top of it was a mound with a pointed tapering projection. A few pieces of white cloth were tied to the crown of the chorten. Inside, the chorten had a high ceiling which was elaborately painted with different Buddhist deities. All the fresco paintings on the walls and ceilings were worn but the fine, exquisite art could still be observed. These fresco looked at least eighty or ninety years old, but the different colours still revealed their original sharpness and clarity. All the colours must have been made in primitive ways from vegetable dyes and ground mineral powders. There were many sources such as the utpala flower which gave yellow, henna roots giving a bright orange-red colour, pomegranates for dark red, indigo from the indigo plant, ground oxides of mercury and vermilion to give the rich crimson colours, black from burned pine wood, and lac from pine resins, the last of which was used to give a fixing base for all the dyes and powders and to combine them. Gold dust was also mixed with glues for fine touches and we could still see the gold shining on the delicate outlines.

I asked an elderly man when it was painted and by whom. He said "many, many years before, by a reincarnated Lama," (These people use the expression "many many" quite frequently and rarely give any precise time). The people here believe strongly in reincarnation and have a deep faith in this reincarnated Lama. He lived on the other side of the river and his present life was his third reincarnation. This high Lama lived in a monastery perched excitingly on a mountain cliff in front of the village. I saw the monastery through my binocular. It was not very

big, but its position was really incredible. With my binocular I traced the trail from the monastery down to the river. It looked a completely sheer, very narrow trail. I was very excited to go there, but as we had to be back at the camp by the same evening, we had to abandon the idea.

We entered the village which was compactly built of a number of small houses. The architecture of the houses here was entirely different to Tarakot. The ground storey was made of stone slabs and the first floor was made of pine shingles. Most of the houses had rows of windows. Small alleys were paved with stone slabs. On the whole, it looked quite organized. The people here were all Magars, but their life style and appearance were totally Tibetan. Most of the villagers looked very dirty and backward, but the houses and fertile fields indicated their prosperity. Passing through Pungmo village, we went towards the west to Kumrai village. It was not as big as Pungmo and looked completely deserted. From here the whole valley narrowed again westwards, forming the deep gorge of upper Pungmo river. Even in this narrow valley the trail going further westwards was wide and firm.

Time passed quickly and we stopped for lunch at an open site off the track. It was really pleasant to look at the deep gorges and the sheer rocky cliffs of the mountains. The top was covered in blue pine and the ledges and crevices in the rocks were filled with bamboo and grass. We were watching every inch of the rocks through our binoculars hoping to see Himalayan thar *Hemitragus jamalahecus* grazing. We were optimistic as this looked like a perfect habitat. We watched for a long time, but could see nothing. All of a sudden, we heard the jangling noise of many bells coming towards us. We saw a herd of about thirty yak walking in single file towards us. We also saw one man in front leading the herd and three men behind driving them on.

All the yak were loaded with packs on either side. John and I were a little nervous, wondering what to do. We were afraid to stand on the same trail and let them pass for if the yak hit us it would be disaster. We looked up and down to find a safe side to go, but both up-hill and down-hill was too steep to climb or descend. We back tracked a short way looking for a safe area, but instead the trail became narrower. The sound of the jangling bells came nearer and nearer. We flattened ourselves against the cliff face and when the herd of yak came near to us, I warned the man in front to be careful. He said not to worry and at the same time he warned us not to react violently. He made a peculiar howl in order to control the file of yak and lead them past us one by one, but I could see their big shining red eyes looking worriedly towards us as they passed. As every yak came near they stopped for a while and then ran away. I asked one of the "yak men" where they were coming from. He asked worriedly why we wished to know. I was really surprised by his attitude as he wasn't very friendly as is typical of most villagers. The next old man, who felt a little bad because of his companion's behaviour said that his companion had been a little angry since the morning. They had had a dispute concerning their business. I understood from him that they were three partners doing business buying and selling foodstuffs from one village to another. Their caravan came from Jumla and they had come here crossing Kagmara pass. When I asked them about their trail, he said it was quite a good used route, but at that time the pass was full of snow and they had experienced great difficulty in crossing it. We came back to the camp with them.

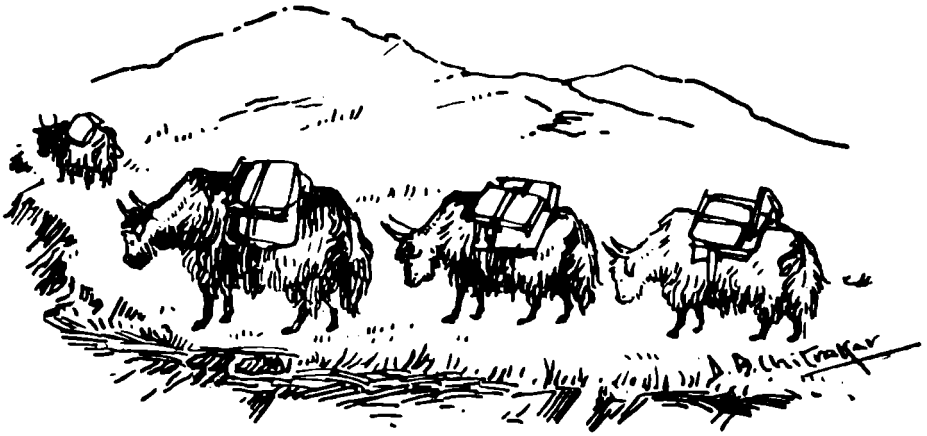
He was an interesting man. He mentioned that this time they had to use the yak to find the trail in the snow. As most of the pass was covered in thick snow, they were a little hesitant to cross, so they first drove one or two yak in front of them. Yak have an uncanny sense for finding a trail in snowy mountains.

He said “yak never step into loose snow or into crevices”.

He had also made a few business trips to buy musk from the people of Tarakot, Dunie, Humla and had sold it at Nepalgunj. He bought a gland of musk for about 150–200 rupees and sold it in Nepalgunj for 400–800 rupees if he could find a good buyer. Most of the musk hunting is done by Gurung, Tamang and Magar people. But Sherpas and Tibetans do not hunt. Tamang and Magar villagers who are influenced by the powerful monastery Lama do not shoot any animals, as they are very afraid of the Lamas. Everyone in Pungmo respected the monastery Lama, who they thought was a reincarnated one. I asked him where they obtained the largest amounts of musk. He replied spontaneously: “In the Jumla region”. But he wasn’t very keen on the musk business as the population has reduced and the price of musk has risen considerably. The number of hunters has increased, so there is a lot of competition. The hunters find their own buyers so there is not as much profit for the middle man as there was before. He said that with limited profit margin it was also risky to buy musk legally, as well as the fact that the musk pod was often adulterated. Sometimes people prepared a musk gland by mixing a small piece of musk with dried blood, and wrapping the whole in a thin piece of intestine, tying it with some thread, and moistening it for a while and finally drying it in the sun. The final product looked and smelled exactly like a real musk gland as the aroma of the piece of musk impregnated the whole blood clot. I asked how to test these fake glands. To test for adulteration one pierced an onion with an iron rod and immediately plunged it into the musk. On smelling, if the odour of onion remained, that was the proof of adulterated musk. No smell of onion should remain and the whole rod should smell musky.

Coming back to Pungmo village, they stopped at a grazing

land where they took off all the packs from the yak. He told me they would stay for two days there to open up a shop for the Pungmo villagers and would then go down to Dunie and Tarakot. It was almost four o'clock and I hastened back to our distant camp.



CHAPTER FIVE

PHOKSONDU THE LAKE OF CHANGING COLOURS

*“O Master devine ! Have you stripped beauty of all her gifts
And poured them down the shores of Rara, (alpine lake)
Here where she sits.
Amidst wreathes and wreathes of snow-clad peaks”*

Mahendra Bir Bikram Shah Deva

Today we were marching towards Phoksondu Lake. It is also called Ringmo which has been named after the village. From the beginning, one of the main objects of our trek was to explore this area. On the map, it seemed that we didn't have to go far to reach it. Passing through dense forests of *Cupressus* we followed an undulating trail long the western bank of the river. Gradually as the valley opened up, the density of the forest diminished and the trail led us to grasslands. The disappearance of the forest did not signal the end of the tree line: we checked the altimeter and it read less than 11,000 feet. We saw many felled trees and burned stumps, and although there were no people in this area at the moment, the degree of human disturbance in this forest was quite high.

In the middle of an open area, there were two deserted houses with no roofs. We saw many dried yak droppings and guessed this to be a high pasture grazing land used by the villagers. One of the greatest advantages for these highlanders is their freedom of movement. All the high pasture are their own. They do not know the system of buying and selling land and the

nomadic life is very popular here. In winter when the snow line descends the people live at low altitudes and in the summer when the meadows are carpeted with green grass, the villagers move higher up with their yak herds and all their belongings. They didn't have permanent houses up there, but they built walls by piling up rocks on top of which they stretched a tarpaulin. The rich people carried their tents along with them on the backs of yak. I had seen a few nomadic campsites, as a matter of fact, they lived more comfortably than in the smoky village houses.

It was naturally a big change for them during their seasonal movements in this rugged nomadic lifestyle, giving them in fact more recreation than hardship. In our eyes, they were very lucky to be obliged to have the natural pleasure of back-packing and picnicking. It was one of the main reasons why rich cattle owner and even poor families with no cattle, shifted their yearly settlement. Cattle-owners spent a lot of time in the mountains grazing their cattle freely in open meadows whereas others shifted their settlements after short periods, working for the richer ones as servants or spinning wool.

This year the villagers had not yet occupied this wonderful no-man's land, so the whole valley appeared in front of us as a vast open land of exquisite beauty framed under tranquility. Standing in the open grassy valley, surrounded completely by huge, rocky cliffs, I could see a complete natural amphitheatre. The west cliff of this valley had numerous perforated holes of different sizes and shapes. The general appearance of this rocky wall was of a coral reef and instantly looking at these mountains, it seemed that this coral reef like wall had been thrust up from the ocean bed during the time of the Himalayan eruptions. The appearance of the wear and tear of the mountains were formed by wind erosion over periods of thousands of years.

This naked, bare mountain, formed mainly of sand stone, was about 2,000 feet in height. Looking at the massive walls, one could let his imagination slip into dreams, conjuring up various impressionistic visions. The whole effect was of fine abstract pointillist technique. I was quite bewildered by this intricate work of nature and lost myself in a dreeam of how it must have been formed and why it was so artistic and how many years nature had taken to accomplish such an arduous task.

There were hundreds of snow pigeons *Columba leuconata* in these cliffs flying around and nesting. We also saw a number of black swifts *Apus apus*. What a good home it was for those birds !

Opposite this mountain on the north-east side of the valley, another range of gigantic, sheer, rocky mountains was looming up from the river bank. Its formation was of spectacular horizontal stratifications giving the picture of huge piles of rock one on top of another. On the south-east side, another chain of rocky mountains erupted sky-wards, displaying entirely different formations. Here the strata of the parental rock was completely vertical and its colour was quite different to the others. I could see many patches of red, distinctly visible from far off. This valley was very interesting from a geological point of view. It was like a natural museum where one could read the various formations of the earth at different ages, through the rock's strata, crags and holes.

Promenading in this valley of beautiful green grasslands, lost in my thoughts and curiosity, looking constantly up at different aspects of these huge walls of the amphitheatre, I felt how tiny and insignificant I was in these magnificent surroundings. My thoughts and imagination of my being flew high, high up, from where I looked down for an aerial view of the valley. My presence was lost in the tremendous height of the mountains.

There was tranquility, silence and isolation. Occasionally, the roar of the waterfall of Phoksondu Lake could be heard as it was carried by the gush of the wind. We walked up slowly. The snow pigeons *Columba leuconata* pecking at the ground and hidden by the grass, flew up fluttering their wings, piercing the tranquility as soon as we came near. The pigeon is not snow white as its name implies. It is in fact, bluish above and white on the chest and belly; so, when it rests on the ground, it camouflages itself very easily against the field. Sometimes I ran like a boy throwing up my arms to drive them in to the air and enjoy the whole effect of their simultaneous flight.

As we went forward we left the open valley behind and we noticed that the trail narrowed as we started to climb the mountain. It followed along loose boulders and rocks. We climbed further up, grasping hand-holds in the rocks and sides of the walls, without getting very tired. The thunderous roar of the waterfall which could be heard far away down in the valley was now completely inaudible. I was perplexed for a while—where was I heading ? Towards the falls, or away from them ?

The powerful, direct sun's rays were hitting the steep trail, making it now difficult to climb. My shirt was wringing wet with heavy perspiration which was flowing in channels down my ribs and back. My anticipation of seeing the fall and lake was so intense that it created an energy inside of me. Reaching the top of the ridge, I saw that a natural rock wall of about fifteen feet in height obstructed the view of the other side of the valley. The faint noise of the fall could now be heard from this point. Knowing the fact that my long awaited dream land, which had been so often in my thoughts, was on the other side of the hidden valley, I agilely jumped over the rocky wall with great anticipation and climbed up swiftly like a lizard, using the momentum of my impact. Reaching the edge, I held onto the sharp ridge of rock.

In some ways, this rocky wall functioned as a natural fence between the fall and the trail.

On my climb when my head came level with the top of the ridge, I could hear the most magnified and thunderous roar of the falls. It was quite difficult to stand or to sit properly, but the commanding view from here of the dream valley was magnificent, so I somehow held onto a fixed rock and managed to sit comfortably on a narrow ledge which afforded me the best view. I looked down: I was at a dizzy height of nearly 1,500–2,000 feet from the bottom, a sheer drop below. The sight of the waterfall was incredible. The spray of the cascade appeared as huge clouds rising from the narrow gorge. Millions of litres of water were rushing out from a natural gutter and falling down 550 feet, creating the biggest and tallest waterfall of the kingdom. The continuous mist and vapour which covered almost all the basin of the Suligad river gradually condensed into the river itself after its celestial ascent. The endless chain of vaporisation and condensation of the spray and water was like watching a slow motion picture of this natural graceful phenomenon.

At the bottom of the valley, seventy or eighty foot tall blue-pine trees appeared only as young seedlings. I sat for hours breathing deeply and calmly, watching the enchanting waterfall and its surroundings through my binoculars. Golden Eagles *Aquila chrysaetas* and snow pigeons *Columba leuconata* were flying around in and out of the mist. Bob and John were also watching and admiring the incredible sight of nature from their own observatory posts. Lal Bahadur arrived, leading all the porters, said a few words to me which I couldn't hear because of the noise, and passed ahead. I watched, timelessly spellbound. At last however, I became uncomfortable balancing on the narrow ledge, so I slid down slowly to the trail. The thunderous sound of the fall suddenly decreased to a soft noise. It was unbelievable

that a fifteen feet high rock wall could obstruct the wave lengths of the roaring waterfall.

The trail now followed the mountain ridge. After walking a short distance, we had our first glimpse of a small portion of the lake. It was hidden mostly by the spur of a bare mountain, but as we advanced it came more and more into view. From a distance, the blue water of the lake looked incredibly still and calm, but in fact it drained out from the southern end into the same enormous waterfall which had hypnotized us for such a long time.

The trail now sloped gently downwards along a ridge. Passing through young pine forests we reached the south-east end of Ringmo lake. The lake looked very big and deeper than we had expected. The colour of the lake from afar was blue, but now it was deep green. From the lake-side the colours of the water seemed to change constantly from blue-green to dark green. Bob liked to say that the colour was of lapis-lazuli whereas John described it as turquoise blue. The still, long lake was set amidst a yellow-green birch forest *Betula utilis* covering all the surrounding foothills of the high towering cliffs. The lake was filled at the northern end by melting snows from the eternal cradles of the Kanji Roba range.

We camped on the southern bank of the lake. The porters dispersed, leaving all the load near our camp, and went towards the village. This village, near Phoksondu lake, was called Ringmo; hence the lake was also sometimes called Ringmo Lake. Ringmo village was very small with just a dozen houses or so, some of which were abandoned. Most of the flat land was tilled for barley cultivation. The people lived here only during the summer season, and in winter they went down to lower altitudes, to places such as Pungmo, Roho and Dunie. It was quite sad that the forest area on the southern bank of the lake was alar-

mingly encroached upon for agriculture, as there was nobody to exercise control.

The lake had equal amounts of fresh water flowing in and draining out, so there was not much biological activity. We saw no migratory birds such as ducks, cranes and coots and Bob commented that this was not an active migratory route. The only birds we saw were the same snow pigeons *Columba leuconata*, a typical Trans-Himalayan species flapping around on the lake's banks. The area surrounding Ringmo Lake looked unsuitable for blue sheep. However there was a record of a blue sheep being shot there by a colonel who had visited this area some years back. We explored the forest without finding any animal life, even though it gave a semblance of a good habitat for Himalayan thar *Hemitragus jemlahicus* thar and musk deer *Moschus moschiferus*. I searched for droppings of the musk deer but there were none. It was very disappointing not to find any indication of wild-life. A long walk however, helped us to find a few finches and some tiny warblers *Ticea castaneo coronata*.

On the south-east bank of the lake there was a small monastery. The door was locked and I peeped inside through a crack, but I could see nothing in the darkness. The lama of this monastery had gone down to Dunie and an old man from the village was taking care of it. At first I thought to call him and have him open the door so I could see inside, but changed my mind.

We stayed in this area for two nights and explored the valley in the hope of finding some interesting fauna, but nothing really impressed us except the beautiful scenery.

The night was little cold. Nima brought local chhayang of which I tried about a teacup-full and on top of that I took

a few pegs of rum. I became a little tipsy but I wasn't worried as there was no hurry for me to get up early the next morning. I couldn't sleep until two o'clock. I kept waking up, my mouth dry and my body dehydrated from the drinks I'd had after dinner. In the middle of the night I had to ask Lal Bahadur for the drinking water and asked him not to bring early morning tea, but to wake me only when everyone had finished breakfast. I felt uncomfortable inside my narrow sleeping bag, tossing and turning to find a position conducive to sleep. After a long time I fell into troubled sleep.

I sensed a dream where there were no mental visions, but where a bleating sound resonated in my head. I opened my heavy lidded eyes. The brightness of the tent, illuminated from outside made me realize it was quite late. Yet still the bleating noise continued more and more loudly. I opened the flap of my tent and popped my head outside. It was quite strange; from where on earth was this noise coming? I came out from the tent and looked everywhere, but still I could see nothing. The noise was echoing from every corner of the mountains. I asked Lal Bahadur, who was busy cooking breakfast next to my camp what the noise was but he was as equally surprised. It seemed that all these bare mountains and rocky crags were emitting the bleating noise. After some time I caught a glimpse of about twenty or twenty-five goats with my binocular. They were heading that way along an incredibly narrow trail next to rocky walls and about twenty to thirty feet above the lake. From afar the rock walls seemed perfectly vertical. At first I was so excited to see those goats, remembering my previous disappointment at the lack of wild life. The number of goats increased, one by one, until finally I could see more than a hundred goats in a single file. The existence of the trail was deceiving from a distance, as it was hidden by the undulating projections of the cliff.

After observing the file closely from beginning to end I saw a few people at intervals, pushing the goat herd forward. I was amazed how these men could walk on such a path where I was not ready to believe even a goat could walk. The bleating echoed from the four walls of the towering mountains. I became a little scared knowing that very soon we would have to follow the same route in order to reach our destination.

For no particular reason, the commencement of our trek again was late. All the porters packed their own loads. Angmo was waiting for our cooking kits. She looked quite pretty this morning. Her face was washed and looked smooth and clean but her hair was still messy, although she combed it quite often with her fingers. I asked Lal Bahadur why her face looked so clean this morning. He said he had given her one of his cakes of soap to wash with. She smiled and covered her face with her hands as she felt very shy at our gentlemanly comments. All the porters finished their packing and left the camp site, but the young Gurung boy, still binding and rebinding his basket, remained behind. He looked restless and nervous for he was waiting for his "dream-girl", although he was pretending to be absorbed in the packing of his basket. Lal Bahadur got angry with the Gurung boy for taking such a long time to pack these small things and said jokingly, "Are you waiting for your kanchi?" (in Nepali, 'kanchi' means girl-friend). Angmo acted as if she were very angry, pulled up some grass from the ground and threw it at Lal Bahadur. She looked back towards the Gurung boy and shouted at him, exclaiming, "Why are you watching me like a hungry dog?"

We had to go alongside the northern end of the lake. It was really a very dangerous path, just wide enough for one man to walk on with great difficulty. The trail was made by cutting out the rocks on the ledges. Where the face of the rock was

vertical and there was no ledge, strong birch poles were driven into the crevices and on top of these stone slabs were placed. It was really risky to walk along this improvised narrow trails, as under the stone slabs one could not see if the poles were rotten or holding well. We were obliged to advance along this narrow trail holding onto the rocky sides with our left hands, while on the right side there was a sheer drop into the icy deep-blue waters of the lake. The whole crew moved forward very slowly



and carefully. Both Bob and John clicked their cameras at every opportunity so that they could recapture the most adventurous trail of the trek. Everyone was deeply concerned with their steps and with eyes glued to the trail, they would cautiously put a foot forward onto each slab, balancing, and testing if it were safe. When I think of the construction of this most pri-

mitive path on the impossible rocky cliff, I simply cannot realize the technique the local villagers used on it. It must indeed be the most dangerous task a man can do, especially to drive the poles into the crags and crannies at the height of hundreds of feet of rocky cliff. My deep respect over-flowed for these honest villagers when I saw the risky tasks that have been undertaken by them purely on a voluntary basis.

The innumerable flickering silver ripples of the tiny waves reflected the morning's bright sun rays that dazzled our eyes, making us walk more carefully. Sometimes we had to shield our eyes with our hands. After two furlongs of this dangerous trail, the path led upwards for about three or four hundred feet above the lake. The porters advanced by walking and sometimes creeping, taking the utmost caution with every foothold. We breathed deeply with satisfaction at reaching the other end of the lake, and so did the porters. From this side, the lake was not as impressive as from the other end, as it looked quite narrow and rather like a wide river. Now the trail followed a gentle gradient along the sharp shining beds of rock. From here we were very close to the Kanji Roba mountain range.

As the morning progressed, the weather darkened and by lunch time the beautiful Kanji Roba ranges were fully covered with heavy clouds. Shortly a heavy rain storm blew over. We shivered and huddled into small balls like snails. I sat in a small cave and unfolded my umbrella to protect myself from the freezing gale. The rain stopped but the gusts of wind were still torturing and when the cold blasts of wind swept away the moisture from our bodies, we were almost frozen. Our teeth were chattering and our chests hollowed and shaking. At this high altitude, the ice-laden wind made it impossible for us to warm up. My umbrella, which often protected me from many things could not be used, as we were at such a dizzy height



Millions of litres of water were rushing out from a natural gully and falling down 550 feet, creating the biggest and tallest waterfall of the kingdom.



From time to time, we could hear the exciting sounds of the avalanches from the massive face of Kanji Roba.



The Ringmo Lake looked big and deep. The colour from afar was blue. but now it was deep green. Bob liked to say it was Lapis-lazuli whereas John discribed it as turquoise.



Higher and higher...



The existence of the trail was not apparent from a distance, as it was hidden by the undulating projections of the cliff.



He took a full twenty minutes to crawl up this dangerous rock-fall area.



He tried hard to see, screwing up his eyes, all he could see was the reflection of his own eye-lashes.....



*Incident had brought us together to meet once again at Kathmandu.
Girls from Seng Khola.*



A wealthy lady from Dumie.



She loves smoking !

and on such a narrow trail that if I opened it, I would most likely be blown off by the powerful storm.

Somehow I came down quickly to the narrow gorge and found an angel, an old man from Ringmo village who had made a camp. He was here on a casual visit to bring all his yak for grazing. His bed and cooking place looked very warm and comfortable in the shelter of a natural cave and he was burning pine wood. He welcomed me to warm my freezing body, showing a wide hospitable smile. He was busy making a wooden basket from pine shingles for a milk pail. As soon as I saw the stacked fire, I felt like jumping on it and warming myself right to the core. The fire was smouldering, with no flames and I requested the old man to build it higher. I lit a cigarette which was rather damp and gave one to the old man. He put another bunch of dried pine and juniperus leaves on the fire. The dry leaves burned quickly into a blaze, crackling and spluttering. The smell of the juniperus leaves spread aromatically and almost heavenly throughout the cave.

With curiosity, the old man asked the usual questions about my visit where and why. Instead of replying I asked him many questions concerning the trail we would follow further up—how and where. As I was asking this, I was busying myself stacking up the fire. After half an hour John arrived in the cave. I could see a wide smile stretch across his face when he saw the warm fire. He stood near it, rubbing his big hands and exclaimed spontaneously, “Damn it, I’m freezing !” Bob joined us after some time, his umbrella stuck down the back of his collar. The glare of the fire sparkled on his glasses in the semi-obscurity of the cave. He greatly surprised the old man by saying in Nepali, “Oh ho dai, kasto ramro !” (Oh, my brother, how nice !). The old man stared at Bob, with his mouth half open, astounded to hear a white man speak Nepali. He was a little convinced

by my jokes that Bob was a Nepalese albino. The porters had still not arrived perhaps they had all been delayed because of the storm and wind. We enjoyed the fire for a full one and a half hours and when we were completely dry the porters arrived.

There was not enough room in the cave to accommodate all of us, so we left most reluctantly, asking the porters to follow us quickly. It was almost two o'clock and we had hardly travelled five miles. After another hour's walk in the lower valley we came across an old man again from Ringmo, sitting by a fire with a young child. In front of the fire lay a big heap of fresh raw meat. It was a yak which had fallen down from a cliff while grazing. The old man seemed rather unhappy because one of his yaks had been killed, but when the porters and my friends wanted to buy it, he seemed relieved. I was quite shocked when Bob and John smacked their lips anticipating a good dinner. All my facial muscles were screwed up at the sight of the huge lump of bloody red meat. Lal Bahadur bargained with the old man for two rumps of meat—finally they negotiated at seventeen rupees for them. I was surprised when the old man said he also had some rice to sell. We bought it immediately without bargaining as our stock was diminishing rapidly. I was quite happy at least to replenish our stocks, although we had to pay six times the Kathmandu rate. The porters took one large rump of yak meat and we took the other. All the porters were very happy to get fresh meat after such a long time. They wanted to camp right in the valley, as it seemed they couldn't wait to enjoy a good meal. After a long discussion with the porters, we pushed on to the upper head of the valley. After forty-five minutes, we found a very good site near Phoksondu river. When we told the porters we were camping here, they were relieved and no longer upset. The whole team of porters was very fast in arranging their cooking place in anticipation of a good meal. The Sherpa porters arranged theirs near the river, and the Tamang porters from Kathmandu settled down beside them and the Sarkis

from Dhorpatan went about a hundred feet away from both groups. Lal Bahadur and Angmo brought big rocks from the river bed and placed them in a triangular position to make a camp oven. I told Angmo that I would give her my whole share of yak meat. She just giggled and started helping Lal Bahadur with the cooking.

The camp site was a superb spot under a uniform blue-pine forest. All the stands were of the same age group. The ground was thickly covered with dry needles. To walk on this mat of needles was like walking on a spongy carpet. I warned all the porters and Lal Bahadur to be very careful with the fires as it could catch quickly onto the dry needles. All the porters brushed away the needles from the cooking places.

My watch showed only six o'clock, but under the dense cover of the forest the night had come earlier. I pitched my tent, it was so nice to drive the peg of the tent in the soft, needle-covered ground.

While Lal Bahadur was cooking, I arranged my bed inside the tent. Angmo brought some hot tea with which Lal Bahadur was always very punctual, I asked him to open a can of sausages and fry them for me. He laughed and said, "Don't worry, we won't give you the yak meat." The flickering lights of the separate kitchens created the atmosphere of a fairy-tale hamlet or a stone-age dwelling. It was still and calm all over the forest and I anticipated angels glimmering like stars and carrying harps. The water flowed silently along a pine-needle filled river bed.

After a delicious feast, discussions, talking and joking were followed by laughter. I went to bed early. Both Bob's and John's tents were glowing from the lights inside and I could imagine John must be reading a war novel and Bob must be looking

after his bird collection. I sank into the soft bed, huddling into my warm sleeping bag. The porters were still talking and joking. I called out to them to be quiet although I knew it was rude and still I could hear their whispering and stifled laughter. But it didn't last long as their good food soon made them sleep. When everybody slept, a perfect stillness and pin-drop silence enveloped the whole world. From time to time, we could hear the exciting sounds of the avalanches from Kanji Roba Himalaya. I could imagine monstrous blocks of snow and ice sliding down from the massive face of Kanji Roba. These occasional avalanches thrilled me, even though they were quite far from us.



CHAPTER SIX

WILD BLUE SHEEP

*"The cry of the wild blue sheep
Is so loud in the empty
Mountains that an echo
Answers him as though
It were a doe"*

Japanese Haiku

This morning we decided to get up and start the journey early, as yesterday the progress was quite slow. I dismantled my tent and persuaded all the porters to get up and cook the food so that we wouldn't have a long delay during the lunch hour. It is always easier to convince the porters to move off earlier than it is to persuade them to travel in the late evening. It is so difficult to get the porters to do anything against their will. They may not say anything, but they act stubbornly just like camels. This morning, all the Tamang porters cooked their corn flour mixed with green chili and the Tibetan porters took "shampa." Poor me! I had to stuff down lumpy porridge and powdered eggs. Every spoonful of porridge and bite of omelette had to be swallowed down with tea just to fill up my stomach and to have enough energy to walk without getting hungry.

I sipped my tea. It was tasteless. Suddenly, frowning, I said to Lal Bahadur, "You forgot to put in sugar!" He replied, hesitantly, "Yes, I did, but only one spoonful." I asked him "but I take three spoons, you know that." "I know, sahib," he replied "but we're short of sugar and I'm economising."

His reply worried all of us. John groaned heavily, "My God, we brought so much sugar." Surprised, I asked angrily, "How on earth could the sugar run out so quickly after only two weeks?" Lal Bahadur was nervous, although it was usually so difficult to find an expression of anger or happiness in his face. His strange explanation was that as there were so many packets of sugar he had not bothered to count them and never realised that it was running out so quickly. Along the trek he had prepared many dishes with sugar such as creamy rice, puddings and tea and this was how most of it had gone. On checking yesterday he had found only one bag of sugar left. My love of sugar and Lal Bahadur's negligence saddened me, but I knew the real reason why it ran out so quickly. I told him diplomatically "from now on, whenever you prepare tea or rice pudding or any dish, you should prepare only enough for four people, so that we won't have to throw it out." He said confidently, "Oh no, sahib, I never throw it out like that." "Okay then," I said frankly, "don't give it to anyone." This time he looked a little flustered. I had often checked that whenever he prepared anything, he made a lot extra and gave it to the porters so that they would help him fetch and carry water, stones for the fire place or wash his pots. Bob also supported me. "Ho ni, chini aba kahan kinne?" (yes, now where can we buy sugar?). There was hardly a kilo of sugar left. I requested Lal Bahadur to prepare no dishes which needed sugar, except for a couple of cups of tea for Bob and John and salt tea for me. I also asked him to be very careful with the rice and onions, so hard to find in this part of the world.

On many occasions, I drink tea with salt in my home, as my mother's family were formerly involved in business in Tibet and this had a strong influence on their home customs. Salt tea of Tibetan origin is made from a special tea available in conical blocks of various weights. The genuine Tibetan pressed tea blocks are much more expensive than regular tea available

locally. Nowadays in Kathmandu only a small amount of this is used and it is boiled with another ordinary tea to give the original flavour. Butter is also added with salt and the whole boiled. This is all poured down a closed bamboo tube with milk into a churn and mixed briskly with a flat ended wooden stick. Sometimes roasted wheat powder is added to the tea to make it more like a broth. It is served steaming hot in covered "Phaba"—a wooden cup. The taste is lusciously milky with a salty flavour. In fact, a few westerners have told me that it is very much like a consomme soup, rather than the western idea of how tea should taste, but to me it tastes like tea. In Kathmandu, many Newari families who have the influence of Tibetan culture in their homes take this type of tea in the morning and afternoon as a regular snack in a large bowl on top of which they dunk a handful of beaten rice and add "ghee" (buffalo butter). Of course I can't make this superb kind of tea here, but we can make an improvised form of tea boiled with milk, salt and butter, pouring it out at heights, using two cups. Lal Bahadur was admirable and said, "I like this salt tea very much." We made some salt tea like this which both Bob and John tried. Bob was quite used to the taste as he'd drunk it on some other treks, but John couldn't empty his cup. Any way I wasn't as worried about running out of sugar as Bob and John were.

All of us were ready to move ahead and Bob and I checked to see that we hadn't left anything behind. In many places I could see the distinct imprint of body forms on the beds of soft pine needles. I could easily imagine that everyone had slept very well, without changing position. Now our caravan again proceeded northwards passing through pine forests equally as beautiful as those at our camp site. After half an hour of luxurious walking, we came across a strange valley of waist-high caragana bushes.

From a distance it looked completely like a tea plantation because of its uniform growth. We couldn't see any distinct route—we made our own trail like that of jig saw puzzle. The northern side of the valley was our destination. We walked along the winding gaps between the thorny bushes. Luckily I was wearing full length but unfortunately bri-nylon pants which protected my skin from thorn scratches but which finally looked like a brush with all the threads pulled out. This route was really like a labyrinth of two or three miles in length. In fact this wide valley was river basin in which no-one could see the water flowing. It was full of rotting pine needles except for the freshly snow-melted water flowing in rivulets, criss-crossing each other and radiating out to swamp the whole valley. The scanty freshly-melted water was enhancing the primary stage of soil formation by decomposing pine needles and leaves. When we walked, our shoes sank down several inches into the humus. It was really a treacherous area and we soon became tired, our shoes completely soaked with icy-cold water. When we first saw the valley, we guessed its length not to be very great because the mountains on the northern side stood so big that they created an complete illusion. Once we plunged into this labyrinth we had to circle, taking many different diversions, in order to find a path to advance along. Whenever I looked at the mountains on the northern side, they always seemed to be standing at the same distance from me. Finally reaching the other end, we waited for the porters who arrived showing many scarlet scratches and lacerated thighs.

After going a little northwards, the Phoksondu river which we were following joined the Mondhukti Khola which was flowing on the other side. From this confluence, we could see no marked trail—perhaps we would have to follow the Mondhukti Khola. My boots were still wet so before we climbed up, we stopped in this area for lunch and I took off my shoes and dried my feet over the kitchen fire. I was still wearing my favourite

brown khaki hunting boots. I was pleased to see how worn the heels and soles had become and thought of how far we had walked. I had never managed to wear the heavy leather boots which I had bought in Dhorpatan. I wore them only in the Purbang pass when we had to cross the snow-line. They were so hard and uncomfortable with only one pair of thin socks that I had blisters on my ankles and toes.

From here we could see the beautiful range of the Kanji Roba Himal on our west, and could at times hear the roaring of avalanches. Traversing the whole of the Phoksondu area, we found that the north had much more wilderness. There was no sign of human habitation. We spread out our map and found the route indicated along the head of the Mondhukti Khola. There was still no sign of a marked trail. The head of this Khola was completely covered by huge dry boulders and it looked as if we would really have to take giant steps from one boulder to another to climb them. Our advance was more a question of navigation by instinct than of following a route. This Khola had also a few dried side gullies, which confused us a little. At the end of the climb we sat on the edge of the gorge to regain our breath. From there our next outlook to the north was a big horizon of the alpine meadows—so peaceful and refreshing to behold. Trekking in those rugged mountains was like travelling in a fairy land, where one passed so unexpectedly through a magic door opening from a desert onto an oasis. From here the whole world looked gentle and rolling, completely covered with thick-mats of grass, but to the south the snowy mountains were covered with green forests. We checked our altimetre which read 12,500 feet. We walked over beautiful grasslands, attractively dotted with small flowers. In some places, the white sterila flower *Stellera chamaejasme* bloomed from a deep-red bud. Yellow dandelions and buttercups *Renunculus offinis* opened up like small gold coins scattered onto velvet. The buttress

of the mountains rolled in a wide circle. None of us really felt like remaining behind lazily to rest. The path followed the contours of the brightly decorated meadows and we felt we were walking in a dream land. We stepped forward with great enthusiasm to discover what lay beyond the buttress of the mountains and the coming bend. The smooth inviting trail helped us psychologically to overcome the high altitude and so slowly and surely we pressed on.

After crossing a couple of alpine valleys, we reached the fringe of a high mountain forest. I was surprised to see this as the tree line had ended far below; we were quite confident that we were climbing slowly along the contours, but how could the trees appear again at this altitude? We checked our altimeter to confirm this and surprisingly it read 14,000 feet: this was a beautiful high altitude forest of birch trees. It was one of the most remarkable things I have seen in my life: twenty to twenty five foot tall trees growing above the tree line. These birch trees had silvery papery bark which could be peeled off very easily. At the top of the trees, the white stems of the branches looked more prominent than the green leaves. I peeled off a long piece of bark. It was reddish colour inside and was a little thicker than paper.

The original legends and myths of the sacred Hindu books were at one time written on this paper-like bark. Especially in the Hindu religion, before paper was invented, the Rishi and Maharishi (hermits) who isolated themselves and were self educated, started the art of writing on this natural paper. Many of the Hindu manuscripts were written on silver birch bark. Still there are records of the preservation of the manuscripts in some of the holy cities of India. Some Hindus believe that Lord Shiva used this bark to write amorous letters to his lover Parvati.

From 14,000 feet, we descended gently along the mountain

contours towards the head of the river. The birch forest was replaced by *Juniperus* and other bushes. The river water, melted from dust-covered ice, was very muddy. We decided to make our camp on the other bank of the river. All the porters were behind except Nima and Angmo. The poor Gurung boy could not keep up the speed of Angmo, who always walked much faster than he. Nima said that this was the last place to find any fuel wood and we had to gather it for our onward trek. It was a little early to stop for the camp, but the porters from Kathmandu were slow and we thought they must be tired from walking for such a long time in this high altitude area. We checked the altimeter again which read 14,000 feet; this would be the highest camp since we had commenced our trek. We believed Nima about the firewood, as he was always serious and honest and as he knew this area better than anyone else. Before we decided anything, we thought we had better wait for our porters to reach the site. But they came a full hour later and when they arrived, they all looked very tired. They were dragging their feet and some of them were limping, as if hundreds of pounds weight were tied to their legs. Everybody was worried that we might ask them to move further on. When we told them that "today we are staying here to make an early camp as tomorrow we have to walk a long distance," they were very happy and were glad to have this camp site without bothering too much about tomorrow's long trek. For them the present was their concern and at present they were very tired. All the Gurung and Tamang porters slipped off their woven bamboo baskets, standing them on the ground and rested their backs against them. Without speaking, only breathing deeply and heavily, they stretched out their legs in front of them to find the most comfortable and relaxing position. In their thin chests, the heaving diaphragm was clearly visible. They all looked vacant, staring fixedly ahead. Some even forgot to take off the leather strap around their foreheads which supported the

whole load. The Gurung boy, who was always as active as a young bull, collapsed against his basket, even forgetting to smile at his young beloved. I could imagine that some of them must be getting homesick; the older ones must be thinking of their children and the younger ones of their new wives. They had come a long way, to earn just a few rupees a day, which they also had to use for eating. By the time they went back they may have been able to save only a little money for the hard labour they had exerted. I felt a strong spasm of compassion for these porters, but I knew that my compassion alone couldn't help these people. What I could do was to give them momentary pleasure. I gave three packets of my cigarettes to distribute amongst them. Three packets of cigarettes didn't really cost me very much, but in this remote land, giving cigarettes which were running out fast was quite a significant sacrifice.

Angmo and Nima collected dry brush and stacked it all into a heap, suggesting to the porters to carry as much of it as possible as they had to cook their own food. At this time especially Nima and Angmo wanted to be very active as they wanted to show to the others that they were very strong.

It was always an immense pleasure to set up the camp early in the day, as it enabled us to explore the area. I pitched my tent with Nima's help as usual. He became a great friend of mine and always loved to help me, always hoping to receive something from me. He didn't smoke, so he never asked for cigarettes, but he was very fond of sweets and tit-bits from my "Pandora box" and always made eyes at my supply of dried meat.,

It was only three o'clock and the landscape of golden rolling mountains set above the meadows was magnificent. The river that we camped next to flowed northwards and after 150 or 200 yards, the channel of the river disappeared into the breast of a steep rocky mountain. Against the rolling horizon, this rugged

mountain of hard glinting crystal forms looked like a huge monster standing massively, constantly drinking the whole river. The area was exciting and lonely and there was no sign of human disturbance here. Nima said that from now on we would be in the home of the blue sheep.

The blue sheep has held a magnetism for me for a long time: one of our main aims of this trek was to observe them. I had not seen this animal on any of my treks in the remote northern Nepalese mountains and had only seen it in text books and heard that it was to be found in the high mountain areas of northern Nepal. I had only a vague idea as to the real situation of this animal: I didn't know whether it was in danger or on the verge of extinction, nor whether its numbers were plentiful, nor what the local people's attitude towards it was. My curiosity about this animal had stimulated me from the beginning of our trek. So, at every resting place, at every bend of the trail, I used to ask about this animal's habitat, habits and detailed appearance with Nima and the villagers, as if I were a small wondering child.

I took Nima with me to explore parts of the valley, asking Lal Bahadur to prepare our meal. John followed me and both of us walked up and down. We were strongly optimistic that we would see the blue sheep and so our cameras were completely set with light system, etc. all ready. We strolled in complete silence, running our eyes over every meadow far and near and crossed quite a lot of rolling valleys, always with the hope of seeing the blue sheep in the next hidden valley. When we no longer had any hope of seeing any wild animals, we realized how far we had walked. As the sun set behind the mountains, the golden meadows became coppery. Before we returned to the camp we let our eyes hover over the miles and miles of buttressed mountains but everywhere we could find only a world of silence. With no life, the whole horizon looked like a fine art painting of a beau-

tiful natural landscape. Circling and crossing from one valley to another, I lost my sense of direction on the way back. There was no marked trail: everywhere was grass-covered with freshly broken rocks and every buttress of the mountains we looked at seemed exactly the same. Nima led us back to the camp. He had been to this area three times in his life— each time when he was very young and used to bring salt over from Tibet to Nepal. He had a complete knowledge of the area. We talked a lot on the way back, although it was always difficult for me to understand his words. Much of our communication was through mime and facial expressions. On nearing our camp, Nima busied himself collecting fire wood again and so John and I left him there. John went down to the river bed near the rocky mountain. I also wanted to go down there but since the morning I hadn't been to the toilet and I was urgently looking for some shelter. It was so difficult as the ground was open and I couldn't find any big rocks near-by. I went a little upstream, climbed a small hill and thought of going behind it. As soon as I climbed the hill I saw Angmo and the Gurung boy rolling together in the grass. Neither of them could see me, but I could see them very clearly. The Gurung boy had undone the ties of his wide draw string trousers and pulled them down to his knees, exposing his shining small white buttocks. Angmo's long bakhu was pulled up above her waist and I could see all her naked lower body. She was teasing the Gurung boy very badly and he wasn't strong enough physically to handle her. Each time she laughed and giggled, the poor boy could hardly manage to position himself between her round, solid white thighs. I was surprised to see that Angmo had such magnificent ivory thighs as her face was very tanned. I hid myself quickly and came back to camp before they noticed me, leaving them to their wild game of love.

Lale had prepared a good dinner, and an appetising smell invited me from miles off. From the aroma I could tell that Lal

Bahadur had made dal by frying lentils in butter and then boiling them with chicken bouillon cubes, onions and spices. This was the only item that Lal Bahadur prepared the best of any I have ever tasted. Knowing he'd prepared dal, I became very hungry and ran to the kitchen where I sat on a tin box. I couldn't wait for John and Bob and by the time I'd finished, both of them came slowly back to the camp. John started to drink his whisky. All the porters returned with stacks of dried brush for the night as well as for the next few days. The Gurung boy and Angmo also came, but separately, and from their expressions, it looked as if nothing had happened. Nobody knew about their amorous escapade on the hill. I was curious to know whether they had succeeded in their game or not.

For the next day's programme it was announced that everyone had to get up early in the morning, cook their food and also prepared lunch. The fuel wood they would carry had to be used for dinner and the next day's morning meal. Our camp the following day would be the highest of our trek at 17,000 or 18,000 feet, where we couldn't get wood or even grass. Nima told us that there would be only rock moss.

I went to sleep with my mind fully occupied with the forthcoming trek and of what I had seen in the evening. According to our instructions, everyone had to get up early in the morning and commence cooking and eating. Today the leader would be Nima. He felt a little flattered by our appreciation and the importance we gave to him. He smiled all the time, sometimes he tried to control it, but involuntarily he would break into a smile again. After packing everything, I asked Nima to go ahead and everyone would follow him. There were two routes we could follow—one along the river passing the gorges and another climbing right up the mountain. Nima said in broken Nepali, stretching out the words, "along the river is very long." So

he led us by the short cut. After climbing a precipitous terrain, we found we had to climb a steep rockfall area. It was impossible and absolutely unmanageable to climb it only by foot, so we had to crawl up. Even then it was very risky for us all to crawl up at once because it was covered with loose rocks and if someone climbed and caused rocks to slip, he could possibly kill the man following him. We arranged for four persons to climb up side by side with nobody behind until they reached the top, then the next lot could come up safely. The climb was of 200 to 250 feet. It took a full twenty minutes to climb up this dangerous rock-fall area. It was quite fun to clamber up like a monkey and to watch the others doing the same. So everybody was watching and laughing. I realized that if we had taken the long route, we could have advanced further. In some ways I was quite angry at Nima for his incompetent leadership, but as I didn't express any anger and as everyone was laughing and enjoying the climb, he thought he was very clever to bring the group by a short cut. Whenever a group finished the climb up and reached the top, Nima showed them all the other winding route at the bottom, pointing out with his finger how long it was. For Nima, time and physical effort were not that important and I'm sure he could never realize this loss. Climbing and balancing in this steep rockfall area made us panicky as the altitude approached 15,000 feet. We had to climb it without stopping, as there was no safe place to halt. The effort was tiring and I was breathing heavily.

I was quite impressed by Angmo's tremendous energy. She climbed to the top without stopping anywhere and sat on the edge of the hill to watch the rest of the group following. Her breathing was quite controlled. I could not see any trace of fatigue in her face. I wondered if Angmo had a good education in mountaineering and rock climbing. I bet she could beat any strong western mountaineering lady.

Again the same beautiful rolling mountains opened before us, looking like dozens of giant star-fish resting motionless on the ground. We were gradually gaining altitude, but as all the mountains looked very small, we didn't realize how high we had climbed. Most of the surfaces were covered with deep, spongy meadows, quite different to the lower altitude meadows we had seen before. There were no bushes of *Caragana brebifolia* and *Lonicera spinosa*. There was a large number of patches of the cushion plant, clinging tightly to the rock's surfaces. These cushion mats were like thick soft blankets of velvet, so lovely to touch and so luxurious to walk on.

The grassy meadows gradually disappeared until it was quite scanty. A quick look at the whole landscape spread out before us revealed the different dark green patches of the xerophytic plants. But still some wild-flowers such as purple primulas *Primula denticulata*, and yellow buttercups *Ranunculus offinis* survived well in keen competition with the tough xerophytic cushion plants such as *Androsace potentilla*, *Saxifraga* and many others. Frozen snow lay scattered and *Sousoria* plants covered with dew drops looked like diamonds in the mist.

To the north we could see miles and miles of smooth, round and rolling hills, and to the south the magnificent snow-capped Himalayan range of Dhaulagiri. Seeing the snowy mountains to my south, I gazed at them for a long time with a new excited curiosity. From the time I had been a small boy in Kathmandu, I had always seen them in the north and heard innumerable legends and stories about the Himalayas of the north. Sometimes I felt so happy and proud that we had really crossed over those mighty ranges which, since time immemorial, had been described as the end of the inhabitable world. For the old people of Kathmandu and millions of Hindus of the Indian sub-continent these lands and snowy mountains are the abode of Lord Shiva

and the land of rishis and maharishis, who lead a spiritual life here. While I was there, I sometimes honestly wondered if the gods were there, watching us passing by. . . .

Walking up and down, crossing the horizon, our interest never stuck on one point. We were encouraged to know more and more what lay further on. I remembered the typical characteristics of this Trans-Himalayan region when I later visited the Jasper and Banff areas of the Canadian Rockies—the same kind of topography and similar fauna and flora. The reason was perhaps that the similarity of this Trans-Himalayan region and those areas of the Rockies were due to climatic factors which in the Himalayas were developed by the attainment of altitude. We climbed the highest pass so far at Pangla, which was at 17,000 feet, although it was marked as 17,540 feet on the survey of India map. The view from this pass was breath-taking. We could see miles of dry Tibetan mountains, completely drab and arid. There were numerous morains, completely exposed with no sign of any vegetation. The mounds of the buttresses sometimes displayed a reddish colour, and to the west we could see the wonderful ranges of Kanji Roba and to the south those of Dhaulagiri under a perfectly clear blue sky. It was very pleasant to behold the unexpected comparison between the north and south. Everybody took a good rest and even Nima, who had lived here for a long time stood looking at the beautiful scenery.

On the way down we saw flocks and flocks of horned skylarks feeding on the ground. They appeared quite inconspicuous, but as soon as we approached they rose up chirruping loudly. They flew quite low, a couple of feet above ground level, in undulating motion. Bob Fleming shot one with a twelve gauge cartridge, thinking the range would be too far for a thirty-two gauge gun, but it hit the bird so violently that we could hardly identify the specimen. Half of the body was blown away, the wings were hopelessly broken and it was useless for stuffing.

But I could see the beautiful black and white head and horns on either side of the ears. The nest of this small, lovely bird, a typical Trans-Himalayan species, is built in shallow depressions scratched out by the bird itself. The depression is generally covered with blades and tufts of grass. We looked for some nests on the ground to see if there were any eggs, but we couldn't find any.

We were quite excited now to see the hoof-prints of blue sheep, especially Nima, who showed me each and every mark saying "knaur, knaur," with high interest. "Knaur" is the Tibetan and Nepali name for the blue sheep. The size of the pug-mark measured two to three inches. I asked Nima how he differentiated it from the pug-marks of domestic goats and sheep, but he said clearly and repeated without any explanation, that this was a blue sheep. After looking at the pug-marks in various places, I satisfied myself that it must be blue sheep because if it had been a domestic sheep, there would have been thousands of marks along the trail for, as we had seen, business-men drove along hundreds of goats and sheep at one time. Here we could see only a few marks off the main trail. Our hopes of seeing blue sheep this time brightened, but still we realized we would have to wait for some time.

It was too late to go on to Shey. Today we had really covered a remarkable distance. All the porters had done a fantastic job, most of the time following not far behind us. No one had the slightest headache when we crossed a high pass at 17,000 feet. We were quite worried before that the porters from Kathmandu might suffer slightly from the effects of altitude. But everybody was fine, and they acclimatised perfectly well. Now we were going to experience the highest camp on our trail at 16,000 feet. The camp-site was situated on a flat plateau of a hill. Here the picture of the topography was completely different to that of rolling hills. There weren't any steep mountains but it looked

as if huge mounds of earth with smooth round surfaces had been dumped there; four or five mounds filled the whole horizon. But still the whole landscape gave a picture of Dolpo. The ground was covered with cushion plants and there was no sign of other vegetation. We were all quite happy that tomorrow we would reach our destination of this long and arduous trip. In fact this destination was not planned, as we knew not much about it, only having seen it on the map. There was little information regarding nature studies of this area and the little we did know we had heard from the villagers along the trail and especially from Nima, particularly in reference to the blue sheeps' habitat. When we heard the name of Shey, we were all immediately interested in this place, as we placed a lot of hope on fulfilling our aim there. Especially for John and myself, Shey became the nucleus of our trek and as we came closer and closer our anticipation mounted.

We went to bed quite early as we had walked a long way, but when we decided to camp, we felt our muscles aching. The night was unexpectedly cold and the blue sky we had seen in the morning was covered with dark clouds. There was not a single star in the sky. We wished we could have a camp-fire, but the fuel wood we carried was almost finished with the preparation of dinner, as were the porter's supplies. I felt rather lazy so I asked one of the porters to bring me my dinner inside the tent. I drank a lot of soup to warm up and after that I ate rice, dal and corned beef which satisfied me. Without getting out of my warm sleeping bag, I put all my plates and bowls outside the tent, zipped up the flap and immediately fell into a deep sleep.

When we got up in the morning, there was a fine drizzle. Our tents, when we packed them, were completely soaked. Lal Bahadur was cooking breakfast in the shelter of an umbrella and all the porters were busy preparing their own food, covering

their heads with thick, yak wool jackets. I wore all my clothes, long undertrousers, blue jeans, a couple of sweaters, a wind-breaker and a balaclava cap covering all of my head and neck. Although I tried to cover myself as much as possible to keep warm, I still felt very cold. But we were happy that this evening we would camp at Shey.

We had to cross a major pass and after that the next valley would be Shey. The route wasn't very difficult, but the winding trail in the hills made it seem a little longer. I used my umbrella as a walking stick, as the rain was only light and it was quite uncomfortable to walk with it held open. The trail was slippery and wet. The haze and mist were deposited as dew in the wool of my balaclava cap, as well as in my eye-brows, moustache and unshaven chin. Nima followed me all the time, looking very happy. He became quite enthusiastic to show me a blue sheep, about which I had been asking him for such a long time. Whenever I looked at him, he smiled widely and indicated by hand language that at Shey he would show me many blue sheep. At about ten o'clock we approached the last and final pass before Shey. To reach the saddle of the pass, we had to climb up a little, but when I understood that our destination lay in the next valley, and when I knew that the view of Shey, the Mecca of Dolpo, could be seen from the saddle, I felt like flying up there immediately. This tremendous curiosity developed a completely rejuvenating energy within me and I almost ran up to the saddle of the pass. I arrived there and lay stretched out flat on one of the rocks. I glanced fleetingly over the valley which lay before me. I could see the whole valley with rolling hills criss-crossing each other and at the extreme end of the valley near the river bed I saw naked, barren, rocky mountains shooting up almost perpendicularly. As my vision focussed, I could make out a few houses standing in the lovely valley, but as we descended and came closer, these few houses became a cluster of houses and then finally we could

clearly see the whole set-up of the village way down in the middle of the valley. We were all happy to see signs of life again after four days of desert trekking, since most of our porters had finished their rations, and were hoping to get fresh supplies in the village. Lal Bahadur was also happy to get sugar if possible, or at least rice or yak butter.

I was full of joy coming down into the valley and Nima was following me everywhere I went. This time Nima had full confidence that he would show me the blue sheep. Many times he stopped me and spoke in halting Nepali so that he could check the gully of the valley with my binocular. Nima strained his eyes to watch every corner of the hills, thinking seriously, running his fingers through his wispy moustache and crying out, "Where have all these sheep gone?"

We were not disappointed at all but rather we had a strong feeling that we could sense the animal coming closer and closer. Without losing any patience, both of us watched intensely for the blue sheep. While I was exploring, Nima, highly excited, suddenly ran up to me, holding his index finger to his lips, indicating that I should keep silent as something was happening nearby. A large smile spread over his face as he whispered in my ear that I should direct my path to the other side of the valley. He wanted to show me the blue sheep. He had already seen them, but they had disappeared so both of us were screwing up our eyes searching for them in every shadow and corner of the rocks. I was in front when Nima suddenly grabbed my jacket and pointed out some sheep grazing about 200 yards below in the valley. I saw the movement of the bluish animal against the completely camouflaged background of the rocks and drab landscape. I hid behind a boulder and observed the sheep through my binocular.

The blue sheep, which in Nepali is called "knaur" *Pseudois*

nayaur, is about ninety centimetres in height, and is not really very blue in colour. Through my binocular, I found that the central dorsal fleece was slate-blue in colour and the legs and lower portions were brown. There were black stripes around the eyes and nose. The chest and front knees were also black, whereas the underbelly was white. The horn formation was typical and massive compared to the size of the body. The biggest horn in the group of animals was sixty-five to seventy centimetres in length. The horns had no distinct growth rings, and were rounded and smooth. They grew sideways out from the head and curved backwards. Some of the females had no horns and some had about fifteen centimetre horns curving backwards. Their black tails were always wagging. The males looked thinner than the females. This particular flock had about fourteen members: six adult male, four ewes and four yearlings. The flock was quite sensitive to its old leader. They were feeding on the meadows constantly, showing no sense of fear. At times some of the rams emitted a typical alarming "baah-ing" sound.

When they grazed, the flock always stayed together and never separated more than six to eight feet from each other. The leader looked quite concerned about the flock and showed a strong feeling of responsibility. He often looked around guardedly while the rest of the flock grazed confidently. They didn't look to be very good climbers, as most of the time when they were climbing rocks, they kept falling down onto their knees.

I wanted to take a photograph of these animals, but I had only a camera with normal lens. I viewed the flock, but I could hardly see any thing through the camera viewer, so I had to go further down, nearer to the sheep. Sticking my umbrella on the back of my collar and asking Nima to stay behind so that there would be no disturbance, I descended very cautiously. The hill were completely covered by broken slates, slippery with rain, so I took great care not to skid. I managed to come down

without the animals sensing my presence: the breeze must have been blowing up the valley, carrying my scent away from the animals. Suddenly my umbrella fell while I was crawling. It slid right down to the valley. However, the sheep did not become excited or nervous as wild animals normally do when intruded upon. They appeared a little alert, moving their heads from side to side. All their eyes fell on the umbrella; they stared at it for a while and then looked up, but I couldn't be sure if they had seen me or not. My wind-breaker and jeans merged into the background and were barely perceptible against the slate rocks. None of the sheep moved and after a while they started to graze just as peacefully as before. I was a little surprised that they could be so negligent of their security, but I quickly realized that falling rocks must be frequent in this valley and so the sheep had not taken any notice of my mishap. I was very careful not to slide down and so my every movement was very cautious. I reached to within thirty or forty feet of the sheep; they saw me clearly this time, but they were not frightened and did not try to escape.

Now I could pick out the blue sheep clearly, one by one. One ram, which was not so big in size, had a very long horn. It projected out sidewise, at first perpendicular to its head and after ten centimetres, it curved backwards and finally circled down. The tip of the horn almost touched the ground when it grazed. Most of the dorsal portion and the frontline of the nose, head, eyes, chest and forelimbs as well as the hind legs had distinct black stripes. The yearlings and ewes were much paler than the rams. Some of the ewes looked pregnant and quite a lot fatter than the rams. The yearlings generally followed the ewes. They seemed to be very socially oriented animals, for them the leader of the flock was master. It was always the leader who noticed what was going on around, while the rest of the flock was completely unconcerned. When the leader

discovered something unusual, the rest of the flock looked at their leader and then turned their heads towards where their leader was looking. The behaviour of these animals convinced me that some sort of communication definitely existed amongst them.

This time I could see that my presence was not welcome. It seemed that the leader was saying to his beloved flock in the language of silence, "look, that two-footed animal has been spying on us for quite a long time." They all listened docilely to him and the leader continued, "I noticed him and I'm watching him carefully, looking at how cleverly he is following us."

One graceful ewe walked over to him, caressing his shoulder and seemed to whisper, "What does he want and what is he looking for?" The ram climbed a few steps of rocks; all the flock followed, but he stopped them right there. They stood and asked the leader who was carefully watching me, "What should we do?" He replied firmly, "Don't worry. Keep on grazing. I'll watch him and if anything happens I'll warn you." I experienced a kind of telepathy between myself and the animals and realized that if I couldn't take any photographs of them, I would be missing out on a wonderful opportunity. I unzipped my wind-breaker to the lower chest-line, the sound was magnified in this calm and solitary valley to resemble thick cotton ripping in front of a loudspeaker. The pin-drop silence was torn for some time. I took out my camera very slowly and carefully and clicked a few shots. Every click fired in my ears like a powerful bullet shot. But still the brave leader of the flock gazed at me, curiously.

I was highly surprised by their bold behaviour. I thought that these wild sheep, living far from any human interference, thousands of feet up in the mountains, would be shy and run away as soon as they saw a man so close. But they did not.

I presumed that these innocent wild sheep had never heard the sound of a gun, nor had any of them ever been killed by a man. They still considered man as a strange biped animal, but not as a killer. So they were still trying to guess who I could be. I understood their tame character and after taking a few more good shots, I moved slowly forward to pick up my umbrella.

They all turned around to look at me angrily and then, hesitantly, moved on down to the riverside. When I picked up the umbrella, all the flock looked at me staring nervously. I decided not to follow any longer now. My water-proof wind-breaker was dripping wet with rain. I looked up and saw Nima standing on the ridge, completely soaked with rain water dripping down from his messy hair. He was very happy and smiling widely as his forecast of seeing the blue sheep was right. I started climbing back up to him, slipping quite often on the wet slates.

After having accomplished my aim and gaining a deep satisfaction from seeing the blue sheep, I became aware of how cold the constant drizzle had made me. The altitude was 14,500 feet. The last part of the climb towards Nima was very steep and slippery so I took a side route through the next valley. Here I saw Bob sitting near a caragana bush *Caragana brevifolia*, taking photographs of other flocks of blue sheep with his telephoto lens. I looked to where he was taking photographs and saw a flock of nineteen sheep, composed of many rams. He was also very happy, like me. Quickly we realized that the population of blue sheep here was quite large and very tame. This was perhaps due to the fact that the people here didn't kill blue sheep, as most of them were Buddhists.

Bob, Nima and I came back, passing through a few valleys of this area. Nima was still carrying his load. All the porters had gone on to the village, situated at the south-east corner of the valley. We wondered where John was ! On our way to the

village we saw many herds of blue sheep. This was the first time that we had seen so much concentration of wild-life. Everywhere dry and fresh droppings of these animals were scattered and in every thorny branch of the caragana bushes we found many tiny bunches of fleece. The strands of the wool were dull white, but the tips were quite dark perhaps blue. Nima said that very soon the blue sheep would change their colour to a pale grey. I asked him why the females looked fat. This was now the gestation period, he replied confidently. He explained that the lambs would be born in two or three weeks and then the ewes would become much thinner than the males. It looked as though the sheep's sight and smell seemed quite powerful unlike their sense of hearing which was not so acute.

The knaur, although its popular name is "blue sheep," is not a real sheep. This species holds the interesting place between the sheep and the goat. It has neither a goaty odour nor a beard, but its round horns and lack of facial glands are striking characteristics of the goat. Some authority claimed this species to belong to the goat family. These animals are never found in forest areas. They are typical grazers and live only in alpine meadows. They take rest in caves, holes and on rocky ledges where they merge in with the background. The gestation period of the blue sheep starts from mid-May and the male and female separate out from the flock from late May until September. The old rams walk solitarily during the separation period, whereas the mature rams live in a group of males, sometimes also with non-pregnant females. The groups of females include yearlings and immature males. Among the sex groups, an old ram becomes the leader of the ewes. Whenever a leader of any group is killed, the rest of the group becomes very nervous and lives around the dead body for some time. They eventually find a new leader. So it was said that, if a hunter shot the leader, he could massacre the whole group.

Nima told me a sad story about some hapless cases where the rams' horns continued to grow downwards so that they projected beyond the animals muzzle and stopped it from being able to graze as the sheep couldn't get its mouth near enough to the ground to be able to pull up any grass. The poor animals would desperately try to grab a few blades of grass, twisting and turning their heads to get to it. Their extreme exertion would underline the sheer frustration of their efforts to obtain so little. The horns became very big and heavy and these animals were then unable to keep up with the pace of the flock. The leader of the flock would like to lead the yearlings and ewes to different pastures, while these poor old rams, so anxious to stay with their flock, would lag behind, constantly hanging their heads heavily. They finally died of starvation. I found it difficult to believe this story. How could nature have made such mistake and imposed such a punishment on these innocent animals ?

In this particular region, the blue sheep were well preserved because of the people's religion and the influence of the lamas in the monastery. Besides this, the people considered this whole area as a sacred valley. In August, people would come from all over the Dolpo region for pilgrimages. They offered salt and grain to the sheep. Previously many Khampas, after escaping from Tibet, moved sporadically in this area with guns. At that time, they killed quite a lot of sheep. Now, the government has taken most of their weapons, so the pressure of hunting had reduced remarkably. In areas where there was a pressure due to hunting, the blue sheep were quite shy and sensitive. The flocks always kept away from the human trail. On the way to the village we saw a few horns of quite a large size and red in colour, although the horns of the live sheep were a slaty blue. Nima said that blue sheep grazed with yaks and horses, but never with domestic sheep.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SHEY

“THE MYSTIC VALLEY”

“Behind nature, throughout nature, spirit is present, spirit, that is, the supreme being, does not build up nature around us but puts it forth through us.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson

The drizzle had stopped, so the brightness of the cleared blue sky illuminated the whole valley, even though the sun was about to set. Lal Bahadur and the porters had already set up the camp on an ideal open ground next to a village monastery. As soon as we reached the camp, Angmo greeted us with hot tea. It was most relaxing as well as invigorating to sip it slowly; to our great surprise it was tastefully sweet. I exclaimed spontaneously, “Oh ! sugar ! How on earth did we get sugar ?” Lale replied gaily, looking at me, naively, “By magic !” We later found out that he had managed to buy molasses from a village house.

As the meal wasn't yet ready, I went to take a little stroll in the village. Shey constitutes twenty to twenty-five houses. The houses here were not in clusters unlike other Gurung and Magar village I had seen on the trail. Most of the people here looked very poor. They were very happy when our porters were buying their rations. Talking with a few villagers, I found out that we had taken a long way to come to Shey. There was another short route which would have brought us to Shey four hours earlier. I didn't regret taking the route we had chosen. It was

a good route for nature study, even though we hadn't found any exciting wild-life species.

Soon my stomach began to rumble with hunger and as it was getting dark, I turned back to the camp. We wanted to celebrate the evening with a camp-fire, but there wasn't enough wood so all of us surrounded the kitchen warming our hands in the flickering flames. This night was our twentyfirst night out of Kathmandu; we had walked almost two hundred and fifty miles and had crossed quite a number of major passes. Everybody was in perfect condition and the porters had done a magnificent job. This night was especially worth celebrating, after our discovery of the concentration of blue sheep. One of our main aims had been fulfilled at last. Tonight, we were most anxious that everyone should be very happy, so John and I worked out how much we owed the porters so far. All the Tamang porters were very happy to hear the fat amount of their wages, but they wanted to get their final payment only in Kathmandu. The Gurung boy wanted to receive his pay plus two day's advance as he already owed some foodstuffs and money to other porters. Nima took his wages with no expression and stuffed it in his pocket without counting. I asked him to make sure the sum was correct. He just smiled and like a child he wiped his runny nose on the back of his sleeve, moving his head from side to side and indicating that whatever we gave was all right with him. Angmo and the other two Tarap porters counted every single rupee. Angmo drew a Nepalese style draw-string cloth purse from her bodice, stuffed the money inside and put it back into her already filled pockets. I'm sure Angmo was saving quite a lot of money. While I was working out the wages for the Sarki porters, Nima came up to me and asked me to change three five rupees notes which were a little dirty. He asked very politely, scratching his head and reminding me that I also owed him ten rupees as a reward for finding the blue sheep, plus four rupees

when I had sent him for tea in Yamakhar. He was right and I paid him. I was pleased to notice that Nima was not as dull as I had guessed. He knew the art of pleasing someone and pretending to be very innocent.

Finally I called the two Sarki porters who were counting and recounting their wages with the help of all their fingers on both hands. They were worried that what we worked out would be less than what their wages should be. I worked out in full detail and convinced them that they were not cheated. These two porters really saved a lot more money than the other porters as they spent little money on food. Looking at their poor health and life style, I felt sympathetic towards them. Their sunken eyes, hollow cheeks and temples, pointed boney noses and a skeletal bodies covered by ragged clothes made them look worse than beggars.

These Sarkis were outcast “untouchables” from the Hindu community and as such, had developed a terrible inferiority complex. By profession they were cobblers. Although they were Hindus they ate beef and worked with hides and skins. All the porters treated them as if they belonged to a different species of *Homosapian*, although none of them gave them very hard work. I tried to uplift their morale as much as possible, so that the other porters wouldn't prejudiced against them. Sometimes I yelled at the Kathmandu porters, who especially resented the presence of the Sarkis. This was noticeable when they were cooking and the Sarkis wanted to have some fire or water: they always shooed them away. I had never seen them smiling and the whole time they looked as if they were in a lot of trouble. They never separated and were usually constantly muttering to each other, complaining that their loads were heavy, etc. But they never discussed their complains with anyone, nor mentioned the discrimination against them. They simply stared, never

entering into conversation with anyone. Sometimes their lack of sense of humour and lifeless behaviour irritated me.

After distributing all the money we felt quite relieved, ridding ourselves of a burden. The porters from Tarap wanted to go back home from this village not because they had received the money, but because they realized that our load had decreased quite a lot since the beginning. At the same time the way to Tarap was only one or two days further on from here, so we told them they could do whatever they like. By now, we had formed an emotional attachment to them. Everything was much easier for us now that we had a mutual understanding amongst ourselves, where little convincing was necessary. We knew their speed and they knew our temperament. Because of this mutual understanding, the situation was most pleasant and everyone wanted to make everyone else happy.

This evening everything was happily organized. I told everyone we would make dal for them. On the faces of all the porters, including the Sarkis, I could see rays of happiness at the mention of the word "dal." This is always a luxury item for these poor people. Lal Bahadur was little worried about this: not because I was taking over his job, but because of our shortage of lentils. He whispered in my ear that I should be very careful with our lentil supply. When I checked the amount of lentils in the cotton bag, I knew it was really not enough for us for the whole trip. It concerned me quite a lot as a dal lover. If I made dal for everybody now, it would only have been enough for another three days and we still had two or three more weeks to go. My fingers were still unconsciously playing with the lentils and I was pondering on what I could do. I looked towards all the porters; they were anticipating a good meal without realizing my problem. Everyone busied himself cooking rice (a luxury), even the Sarkis, as we would be serving the dal. I couldn't

deny my generous offer to these hopeful people. Lal Bahadur, another great dal eater, still looked very worried at my indecisive attitude. Pretending to help me get out off this dilemma, he whispered in my ear, "If you cannot say this, do you want me to give them two rupees each to go and drink chhayang." He said, trying to convince me, "These people would much rather prefer to have two rupees than our dal." But I kept silent, my fingers still playing with a handful of lentils. He reminded me again dal was impossible to get in this part of the world. I didn't say anything, stood up and went to open the kitchen box checking all our provisions. There were enough Knorr chicken cubes, soup packets, dried peas and noodles. I took out cubes of chicken, packets of soup, dried peas and noodles. I asked Lal Bahadur not to worry about the dal.

I asked the Gurung boy to prepare the kitchen for me and to make a fire; he was to be my kitchen helper. I didn't want to make anything with Lal Bahadur in the same kitchen. Whenever I made something, he was always advising me with such comments as "A little too much salt, add a little butter, and so on." So for my independent cooking, the Gurung boy was the best. He was very flattered by my request and chauvinistically asked Angmo to cook rice for him, throwing her a whole pack of his provision. The Gurung boy boiled the water in the biggest pot we had in our caravan and put in all the chicken cubes. After boiling it a little I put in all the noodles. To make this soup thicker since I had to serve it as dal, I added the contents of the soup packets as well as some flour. I added some salt and the packets of peas. I realised afterward that I should have put in the peas first. While boiling the whole pot of soup, I sprinkled a handful of dal to fulfil my promise. I noticed that this would not even be enough for six people and there were so many porters. I put two more small pots on the fire and poured the boiling soup into the two pots and added water to all of them which

I did, I hoped, without anyone noticing. Now I was sure that with three pots of soup there would be enough for everyone.

I frequently tasted it with a spoon. It was good, but a little thin. Suddenly I remembered that these porters liked hot preparations, but we didn't have enough chilli powder. I asked a Kathmandu porter if they had any dried chillies. I was astonished to see how many dried red chillies they were carrying. They gave me a handful of fifteen to twenty chillies, which I asked the Gurung boy to crush with a stone and add to the soup. He separated it into three equal parts and put one into each pot without realising the size of pots. The smaller pots had so much chilli that the soup became almost red. Everyone was waiting for our "delicious" soup: the rice had cooked and was resting on the hot coals waiting for our dal to come. The Gurung boy was extraordinarily happy to cook with me today. Lal Bahadur was curious about what was happening in our kitchen and came in frequently to taste the soup. But unfortunately, the dried peas we had added last were still hard and shrivelled. All the noodles were overcooked, had lost their shape and were almost dissolved into a lumpy mess. When the peas and sprinkle of dal were cooked, the noodles were completely dissolved.

I asked all the porters to come forward with their rice and with great dignity the Gurung boy served the dal, or whatever, into their rice bowls. I was a little worried in case there would not be enough soup for everyone. So I asked the Gurung boy to serve only a little on the first round and we would serve more later. The first big pot was enough for all the Kathmandu porters and the Gurung boy served the last bowls to Nima and Angmo. Of course he poured out a full bowl for his sweetheart Angmo unhesitatingly. Finally, I took the last of the soup in a bowl. It was terribly hot and its taste quite indiscernible.

After a few spoons, I gave it all to Nima. I was very happy that all the porters really enjoyed their meal, perhaps for the first time since commencing this trek. It was so hot that all the porters except those from Kathmandu had to exhale constantly and Nima had a runny nose which he wiped on his sleeve. But each time he looked at me, he smiled, raising his eyebrows to express that the taste was good. He took every last drop and finally he licked what was left off his finger which he wiped around the bowl. Angmo did the same.

Morning started early here. I looked at my watch and it was only five o'clock. The glow of the sky lit the large and open valley that nestled between small hills. It was sometimes hard to believe that we were walking amongst the highest mountains in the world. The sky was clear with only a few patches of fleece-like clouds tinged with gold by the dawn's rays. Everybody was still sleeping. All the Kathmandu porters were huddled together in a deep sleep under a big tarpaulin cover. It was quite unusual for me to get up so early on a trek and it was perhaps the first time that I had risen before Bob and Lal Bahadur. Bob must have been still dreaming and I could guess the depth of John's sleep by his faint snoring. I really enjoyed the early morning serenity. I promenaded slowly, exploring the surroundings.

I was thrilled to see the curious Himalayan marmots *Marmota bodak*, heads perkily raised and watching me. At first it was difficult to see, as its brown grey colour blended in with the rocky background. I could notice the quick movements of its head and my eyes soon picked out the body. The Himalayan marmot which Tibetans called "phya" is about the size of a large cat with a tiny head on a thick neck. It has very small ears with a pointed nose. It generally sits on its hind legs with its front paws held up in front. I looked at it through my binocular, but it was so shy and restless that even my slightest move-

ment made it dart back into its burrow. I moved nearer and saw that the burrows had holes of four to five inches in diameter and were very deep. These animals are herbivores and hibernate all winter in their burrows coming out only in summer. The marmot concentration in this area did not seem very great. The highest concentration of marmots I have ever seen in my life was at the basecamp of Manaslu Himal in the Larkya Bhot area, where I counted thirty-five in one morning. They were so abundant there that people could see them sitting beside their burrows at any time of day. Very few people, especially Bhotias, eat the meat of marmots. In most of the hilly regions, many people believe that the melted fat of these animals is the best cure for rheumatism when applied during a massage.

I walked down to the shallow river and crossed it by jumping from one rock to another. At the north-western end of the valley, sheer rocky mountains dominated the landscape. From here I could see a beautiful monastery perched in the middle of the cliffs. It gave the impression of a massive wall mural painted in red against a grey rocky wall. With the idea of visiting the monastery after breakfast, I came back to the camp. I slowly strolled up from the river-bed to the camp-site, exploring each and every corner of the area with my binocular. I saw many flocks of blue sheep ranging in numbers from seven to twenty. Including my ocular census of yesterday, I had counted seven flocks of sheep, with a total of ninety to one hundred and five heads. This estimation was based on direct sightings of the animals in one-fifth of the area of this valley. Hence my personal estimation of the animals here was between five hundred and seven hundred heads or more. This over-estimation was presumed as the sighting of the animals was difficult against the grey rock-camouflaging background. If one really concentrated one could pick out the movements of the animals as they slowly grazed upon the hills. On the way I saw a couple of Tibetan

ravens *Corvus corax tibetanus* disturbing the morning silence with their call notes, shorter than those of house crows. They were about one and a half times bigger than house crows with very distinct, strong beaks. They were entirely glossy black with ruffled feathers. This particular species is typically Trans-Himalayan and an important high mountain scavenger.

Lal Bahadur was still not yet ready for breakfast. He was fighting to make the fire by blowing on it, but his eyes were choked with smoke and he was wiping away the tears with both hands. The splinters of caragana bushes were wet because of the last day's drizzle. Lal Bahadur always hated to have to fight to make a fire. I could well imagine he might be swearing the dirtiest language while puffing on the fire. I opened a packet of biscuits, buttered them and started nibbling on them before the tea was ready. We decided to stay two more nights in this area which made Lal Bahadur and all the porters very happy. I decided to visit the striking monastery at the other end of the valley. Bob wanted to go birding and John to photograph the blue sheep.

After breakfast John left the camp with one Kathmandu porter and with his expensive camera and accessories. From the camp, he had already fixed his one and a half foot long 1,000 millimetre lens in his Lica camera, the body of which was fixed to a wooden butt. When he looked through the viewer, he had to keep the heavy butt resting on his shoulder, as if he were shooting a rifle. Bob always carried two cameras, one loaded with colour film and the other with black and white. He hung both of the cameras around his neck. With his Nikomat he often took close-up shots of flowers and people and with his Asha Pentax spotmatic, with wide-angle and tele-photo lens, he took landscapes and wild life. Both of them were very well equipped with most sophisticated cameras and enough supplies of film.

But I deeply regretted my ordinary Yashica camera. It was not bad, but it had only a normal lens, with which I couldn't take beautiful landscapes, wild animals and birds and which was quite difficult for close-up shots of flowers. Sometimes I felt very bad about how unlucky I was that I couldn't capture the image of the beautiful breath-taking highlights— birds, animals, flowers and the innumerable ranges of conspicuous mountains in their natural colours.

Consoling myself with what I had I hung my Yashica camera and binocular around my neck, collected some packets of snacks and moved towards the north-west end of the valley to where my first glimpse of the enchanting monastery was attracting me. The people here called it the Chakyang Gumpa (Gumpa means “monastery” in Tibetan and Nepali). Previously I thought it was called Shey Gumpa, which in fact is the name many outside villagers gave to it, however there was also another monastery in the village which local people called Shey Gumpa. I understood that in the month of August many villagers came from all over the high mountains for pilgrimages to this sacred valley, circling around the bare rocky mountains and Chakyang Gumpa which held much religious significance for them.

From the camp I descended to the river and after crossing it, I found that the climb followed along a gentle mountain. The trail then continued criss-crossing and weaving through the valleys. On the way, there were many small rock shelters that were brightly polished by the sheltering blue sheep. In these shelters the ground was fully covered by dry and fresh sheep droppings. After climbing a few hundred feet, I reached the court-yard of the monastery. Looking at the monastery, I was reminded of thousands of years old excavations. The whole structure of the monastery had been built by digging into the cliff face, breaking into the mountain rocks and making a

kind of cave. The base was all painted in bright red and the top was painted white. In the courtyard, the base of the monastery was built in the form of platforms, so that visitors could sit all around. On the left hand side I could see a very small gate with a completely solid wooden door giving entrance to the monastery. It was closed. I sat on the platform for a while to see if someone would come or if someone was there inside.

There was no sign of life and I felt I was there all alone in this huge solitary place. Wherever I looked, I could see drab, naked mountains and rolling meadows. In the clear blue sky, signs of the living world were marked by the smooth flights of the griffon vultures; *Gyps himalayensis*. This huge pale-coloured vulture is very common in the Himalayan region and is observed unmistakably many times high up in the sky; each time I see it, its smooth gliding attracts me. I forget its ugly neck and hateful feeding behaviour when it rolls majestically. I followed it with my binocular and observed its splayed wide wings against the backdrop of blue sky while it soared in many levels. I watched it for a while, waiting for this bird of prey to go to its nest, which may be usually found in rocky cliffs and unapproachable mountain spurs.

After a few moments of perplexity I went to the door and tried to open it. It was extremely solid and heavy and was locked from inside. I tried knocking on the solid door with my knuckles, but it didn't make enough sound to call anyone inside. In the middle of the door there was tiny hole into which I hooked my finger and shook the door. No answering call came from within. I looked all the door to see if it were locked from the outside, but there was no lock. When nobody came, I sat on the stone step of the threshold of the gate. I waited for at least fifteen minutes, surprised that no one came from inside. When I had walked such a long distance, I wasn't prepared to go back

without seeing inside. Finally, the heavy door creaked open. I saw an old lama framed against the darkness of within. He was wearing a deep coral-red woollen robe and a yellow saffron coloured shirt. He stood with a slight hunch and looked seventy or seventy-five years old. I noticed a serene smile on his face; he didn't seem surprised to see me. He nodded his head indicating that I should enter, but the moment I went in he stopped me and motioned with his hand that I should remove my shoes. I docilely obeyed the lama. I went into the room which was spotlessly clean. At the right side of the entrance there were open wooden shelves with a few water pots. From the top shelf he took a "Chamo"—a duster or a prayer rod made from a bunch of yak tails tied onto one end of a round stick. He flicked this chamo all over my body from head to toe. He indicated to me without uttering a single word to turn around and again flicked it over me. I still do not know why he did that; was he blessing me, dusting my clothes, or was he wanting to chase away evil spirits from my person? The entrance room was very small and on the right side I saw another door leading to a main room. Coming in from the bright light outside, the interior appeared black and it was difficult to see anything. The lama led me by the hand to another room through the open gate. This room was the main hall of the monastery. It was completely dark, but in the centre of the hall I could see numerous shining prayer bowls.

The lama invited me to sit on a square mattress covered with a long carpet. In front of me there were small wooden "Choksas", the low Tibetan table, resembling a coffee table. I sat comfortably and peacefully crossing my legs on the warm carpet. My mind was completely at ease and all of my senses were fully rested and relaxed, as if I were in a state of meditation, even though I have never known this art before. In the darkness of the peaceful surroundings my eyes blinked frequently. With-

out my noticing it, my hands were comfortably cupped in the middle of my crossed legs. After some time, my eyes adapted to the darkness and I could gradually make out the details of the hall.

The dim interior was lit by the light of two small butter lamps and by the light coming in from outside through two holes cut into the rock walls of the high ceiling. The height of the hall was about fourteen feet and the walls were completely of solid rock. All the left walls were hung with Tibetan scrolls showing various subjects of the Tibetan religion. In the front a statue of Buddha was enthroned on a seat lavishly decorated with red lacquer and gold. The pictures of Karma-pa and Dalai Lama were decorated with "Khata," garlands of thin white cloth. Beside the main statue of Buddha there were a few other small statues and piles of religious books. A large number of brightly polished small brass bowls filled with holy water were kept in rows in front of the statue. In the middle there was a big copper "Gulupa," the oval-shaped metal pot filled with rice grains. On the right hand side the old lama sat on a high chair. In front of him richly decorated "Chokses", carved and painted with dragons, flowers and tashi-takgya, the Tibetan lucky symbols, were placed. On top of these were small heaps of rice.

He never talked to me. After he made me sit, he sat in his chair in "mudra" (a meditational posture). His eyes were closed, but sometimes he would open them. He rotated his prayer wheel continuously and his lips moved to the words of an endless prayer.

I was totally influenced by the divine atmosphere of the monastery and by his magnetic personality of calm and silence. Seeing the lama lost in a deep state of contentment, I felt myself lost in the same way. Innumerable questions of curiosity came to my mind—how the lama had managed to attain such an age in

this place far from civilization, how he could live in such a secluded life, whether he had attained enlightenment and how he could survive without proper food and medicine in such a remote land. This was to remain a big question mark for me forever. I could see knowledge illuminating from the darkness of the monastery and inaudible precious teachings echoing in the deep silence. I lost myself completely in this divinity for about an hour and a half, but I had to go back to my own world to the camp and finally to the same world of momentary happiness, pain, anger, jealousy and competition.

My worldly spirit knocked at my mind to stand up and leave, but my freshly born divine spirit was hesitant. At last I placed ten rupees in front of the lama and asked him, communicating with my hands, to burn a butter lamp in the monastery. He opened his eyes, smiled at me and went out to a small room, asking me to remain seated for a while. After a few minutes he returned with an aluminium kettle and a plate of “sampa” (powdered wheat or barley). He put it in front of me on the “Chokses”, placing his hands palms upwards, inviting me to eat and went back to his own place and sat there. I wasn’t hungry but to refuse would have been discourteous so I poured the tea into a big wooden bowl. I drank; it was my favourite salted tea, but without butter. The taste was very good. I didn’t know how to eat sampa-whether to put it in the tea or to eat directly. The sampa was placed on the plate in a conical shape and it was copious for one person. I had almost extended my fingers to the rising heap of sampa to take it, but I stopped suddenly, remembering my Nepalese culture which teaches not to touch things when the hand is “Jutho”. It is supposed to be contaminated and impure because I had held the cup from which I had drunk and had not washed my hands since. Not being sure that Nepalese culture was the same as Tibetan in these respects, I decided to follow my own Nepalese culture

to be on the safe side. So I took the water pot in my left hand and sprinkled a few drops onto my right hand to make it usable. Then I dipped my index and middle fingers and thumb on top of the sampa, took some of it and put it on my left palm. Then I took all of it in my mouth. The taste was quite milky but it was so dry that I couldn't take it twice. After drinking all my tea, I stood up politely and bowed to the lama. I bid farewell to him and came out from the monastery. A part of my mind remained within where I had sensed the presence of a divine being.

Coming out from the monastery I closed the door and walked back to the camp. On the way, I met a young lama completely shaved and very delicate and soft looking. He was seventeen or eighteen years old with an incredibly flawless white skin. He also wore a deep blood-red robe. He was a little surprised to see me coming out from the monastery. He stood in the middle of the narrow trail and asked me in broken Nepali, "did you meet the High Lama?"

After I answered, I asked him what he did in this area and why he had become a lama-monk at such an early age. He came from the Mukat area, and had recently joined the Chakyang Gumpa as the caretaker and helper for the lama. He had been there for the last six months and didn't know how long he would stay in this area. He helped the lama bringing water from the river, cooking food and cleaning the monastery. I asked about the lama, whether he was "Avatary" (reincarnated), or a monk. The boy replied that he was a reincarnated lama and that he had no idea as to how long he had been there. I asked many questions about this area but it was very difficult to understand what the young monk was saying. Regarding the history of Shey and the Lama, I understood from his story that many years before a high lama came to this area of Shey from Tibet. He lived here for a long time and finally was transformed into a mountain. Since then many of his worshippers from different

parts of the region as well as from Tibet, came here to pay homage to him. His story did not tell me if the present lama of Chaykang Gumpa was a reincarnation of the original high lama, or if he were a different one.

I came back to the camp at about three o'clock. My friends and the porters had already finished their lunch; some porters were sleeping in the grassy meadows and some were playing the game called "baghchal." I collected my food from the kitchen and went over to watch them playing 'baghchal' or "trapping tiger" which is very popular all over Nepal, especially amongst hill people of different ethnic groups. One can see the villagers playing this game in shops, court-yards and "Choutara"—resting places along the trail where a pipal tree *Ficus religiosa*, gives its shade and where the people play on the platform under the tree. The game is very interesting and requires no preparation. All that is needed is first to draw a square with sides of six or eight inches on the ground or on a flat rock. This square is further divided into four squares. Each of these has its diagonal corners joined, so that sixteen triangles are formed. Again cross lines are drawn symmetrically in each square until there are a total of twenty-five cross points. Then two individuals can play, one as a tiger and another as a deer. The one playing the tiger puts four big beans, pebbles or whatever at each of the four corners of the square. The one playing the deer collects twenty small pebbles distinct from those representing the tiger. He places them one by one on cross-sections and on each addition of deer the tiger can move from one point to another to go and eat the deer. Once the tiger has a deer next to him, he can jump over it to another cross section and eat the deer. So whenever the deer moves near to a tiger, he must be very careful not to leave the next cross-section vacant as otherwise the tiger will eat the deer. The tiger's aim is not to be trapped, but always to continue eating, The deer always tries to trap the tiger, so

that it can't move anywhere. A maximum of twenty chips representing deer can be placed on the board, one always being left vacant to allow movement. The principle concept of "baghchal" is very much like that of chess, but it is much simpler and not as demanding intellectually. It is merely a game to kill time. Lal Bahadur was quite a good player and he defeated me easily both when he was playing the sides of tiger and of deer.



CHAPTER EIGHT

“LIVES BEHIND THE HIMALAYAS”

“The mountains will retain their beauty without the animals, but when the last brown bear has disappeared from the alpine meadows and the last snow leopard from the crage, a spark of life will have gone too, turning the peaks into stones of silence”.

George Schaller

For almost twenty-two days we'd been walking and camping in new places of innumerable contrasts of culture, climate and environment. We never felt that we had walked for hundreds of miles and crossed dozens of major high passes, nor did we feel that we had spent such a long time on the trail. During our trek we lost ourselves in the beautiful landscape looking at many ecological aspects, never bothering about what day or date it was. I was reminded of the lapse of time when Lal Bahadur said, “Today is the first of Ashad”, (the third month of the Nepalese calender year). I was struck by the beauty of our timeless journey. Every day we moved forward with new hope and completely recycled energy. Momentary tiredness and fatigue of the days' efforts was relieved and disappeared in the night-long beautiful sleep. The next day came with a feeling of wonderful relaxation and freshness, physically as well as mentally. During the first week it was difficult to recuperate energy. Mornings began with muscular pains and back and leg aches. As the days passed, the pains disappeared, muscles became supple and our enthusiasm surmounted all odds. Our speeds increased

gradually, making our bodies lighter, giving us the feeling that all our rolls of fat were melting into profuse sweat. Whenever we walked on a narrow trail our bodies automatically balanced in the natural state of acrobats. Bodies and minds had become adapted to the air and were almost flying like birds. There was no mental pressure; the inner being was totally independent, free of memory, problems or of happiness. I never dreamt and always slept like a log.

Once a person has attained active fast moving inertia and physical fitness, even the slightest retarded momentum is difficult to accept. After exploring Shey valley, when we had nowhere to go, to stay in the campsite for any period was like stagnating. The porters were still napping. The sun was shining smoothly over the higher mounts of the hills casting its elongated shadows partly onto the river beds and lower parts of the valley. Lal Bahadur rose to make some tea. The days were growing longer in this period of stagnation. I looked at the time; it was only three o'clock. The valley looked to be sleeping quietly and motionless in the bright day light.

Lal Bahadur brought tea and a plateful of sliced potatoes dipped in batter and deep fried just like scallops. They were good for our lazy moments. After tea, John, Bob and I went out for a walk towards the village.

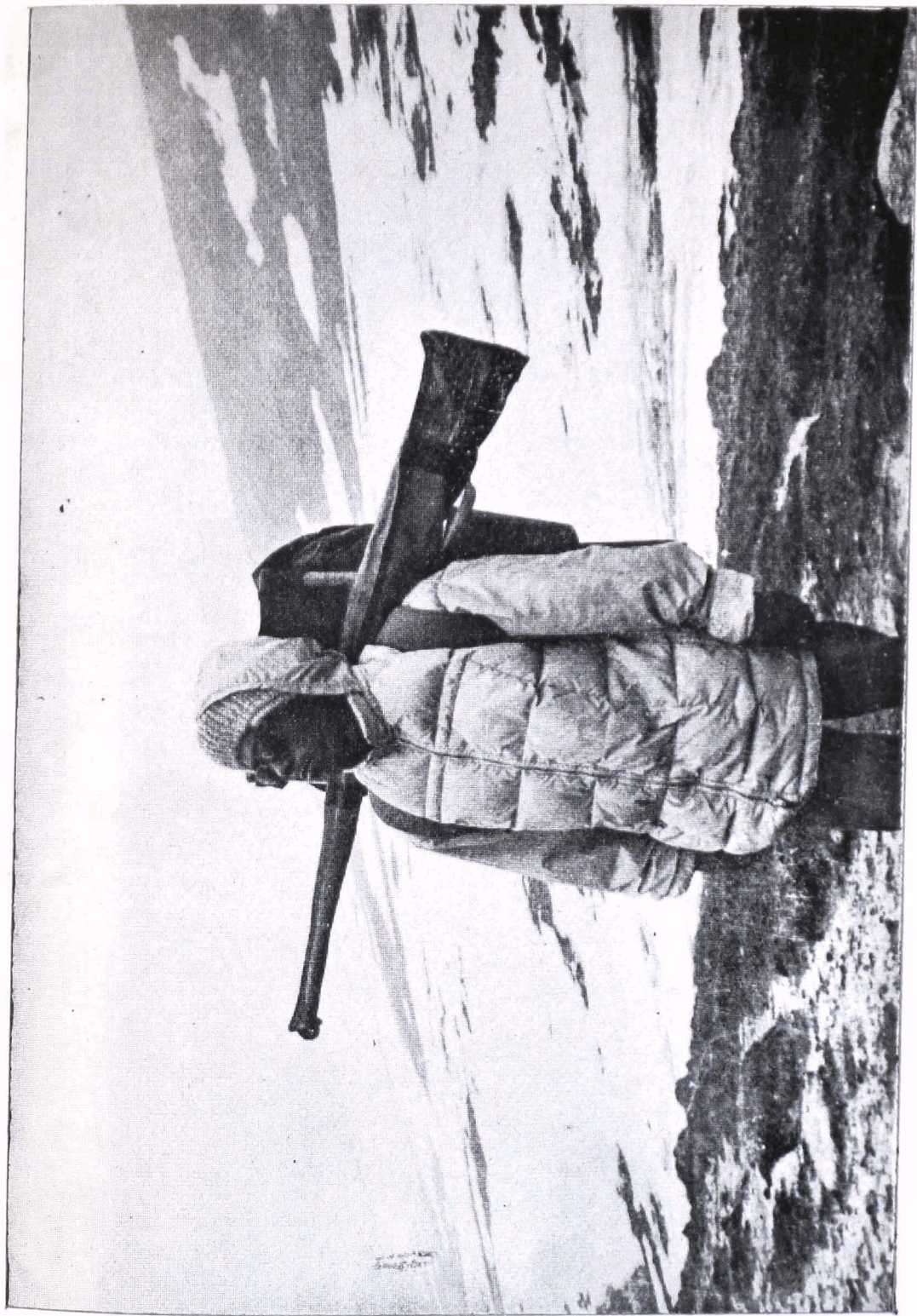
The people here were completely influenced by Tibetan culture. It is interesting to note that although there are many people of Tibetan origin along the northern border of the country, somehow their life styles have some influences of lowland Nepalese culture. The people here were primitive and isolated. Their primitive character was indicated by their untouched communal structure and their inability to understand Nepali. Not only this, they were quite ignorant of neighbouring dialects in contrast to people of Tibetan origin in other regions of Nepal, especially the

eastern and western stock who seem in a good position to communicate in Nepali as well as in neighbouring dialects. These people are acquainted with other cultures and have integrated the better aspects into their society. In the interior of Dolpo, especially this part, the situation is quite different for some odd reason. I was happy that the living history of a primitive human character was still preserved here. At the same time, I felt sympathy for how these people had to live— potatoes for breakfast, potatoes for lunch and again potatoes for dinner.

I am not surprised by the gap existing between Kathmandu and big western cities. They are thousands of miles apart and entirely different aspects of the world. Across the terrific span of east and west civilization, an optimistic link could be foreseen; but Dolpo and Kathmandu ! it made one tired just trying to find a link in the immense gap between these two different districts of such a tiny country.

The main reasons for this secluded life style of Dolpo is its great physical barriers confining it in a pocket of isolated wilderness. It is surrounded by the full range of Kanji Roba massif in the west and Dhaulagiri range encircles Dolpo from the southern to the eastern boundaries. Nature controls movement and accessibility to this hidden land. The only gateway is through a high passes, open only in summer and in winter heavy snow paralyzes all movement. Regarding the predominantly Tibetan cultural and ethnic influences in this area, Christoph Haimendorf said that it is undoubtedly a result of the easy communication with Tibet. The only easy access to this pocket was from the north across the Tibetan frontier.

When I was chatting with the villagers I was surprised to hear that these people had not only heard of but had seen a few white travellers here; however they had never seen a Nepali in western outfit with mechanical accessories. They hadn't even



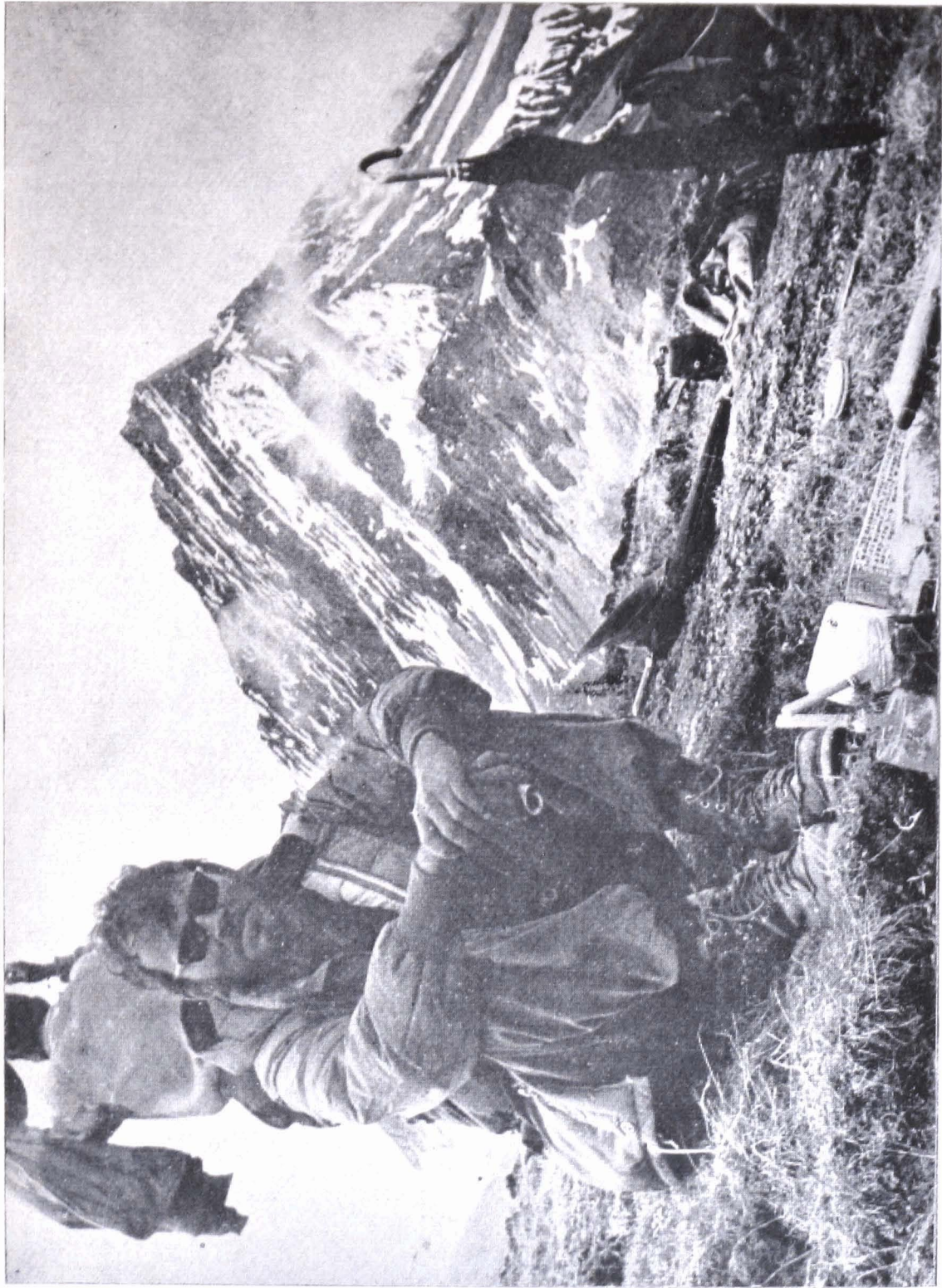
Lal Bahadur Tamang, our head cook, was also an ardent naturalist.



John Blower and author in the Arctic-like desert land near Shey.



If Angmo had had a good education in mountaineering and rock-climbing I believe she could out-climb any strong Western mountaineering woman.



Bob Fleming with his umbrella framing one of the 20,000 foot unnamed peak.

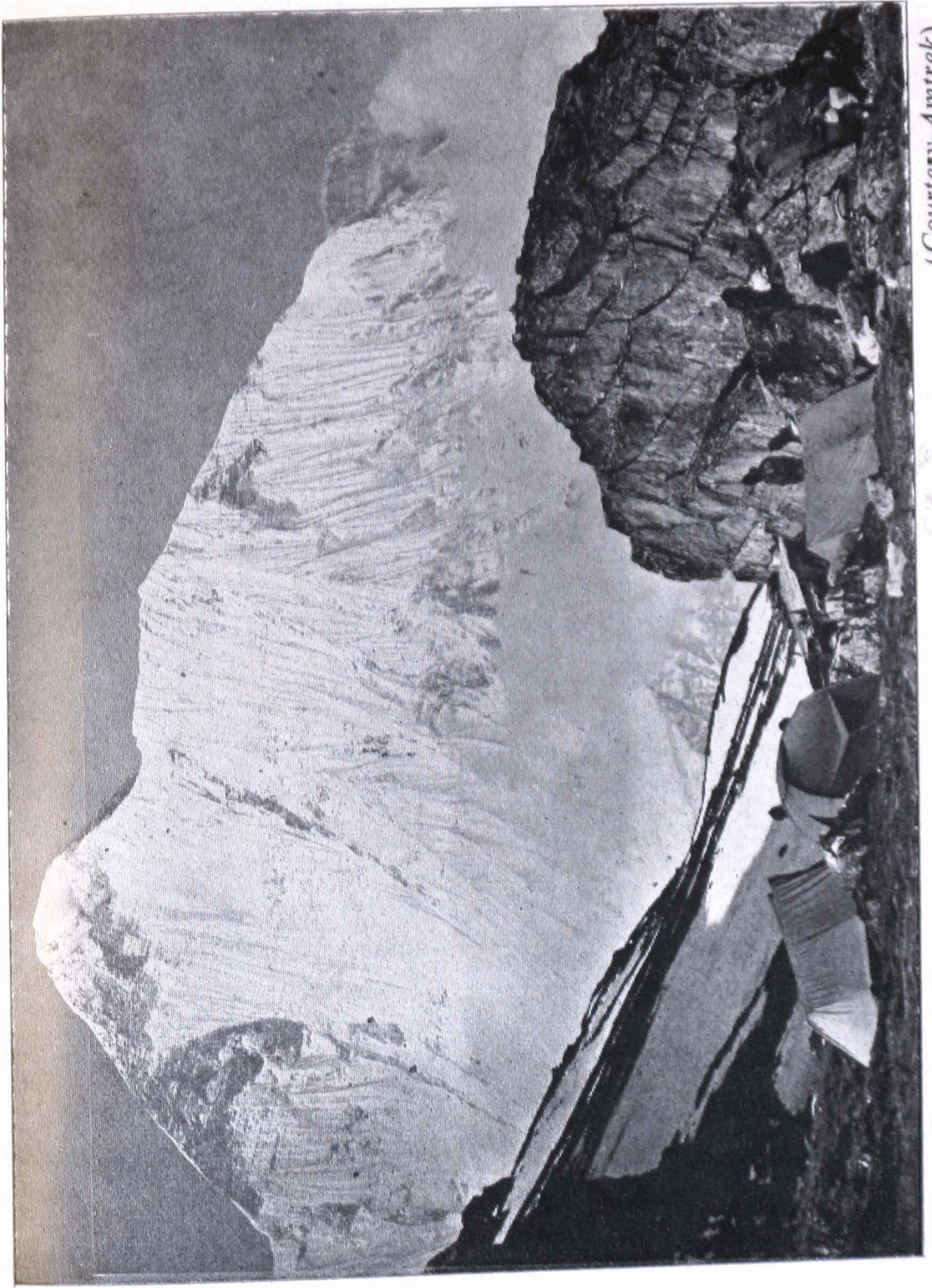


Nima was desperately hunting to buy more provisions.



Bridge— Meticulous, indigenous engineering.

Photo: Fleming Jr.



(Courtesy-Amtrek)

Dhaulagiri II



A caravan of goats "the camels of the high altitude" carry merchandise from one village to other.

seen Sherpas with whom the villagers sometimes confused me as I was accompanying white people. The main reason was because the Himalayas lie south of Dolpo and mountaineers from different parts of the world do not come to this side, since it is way beyond any Himalayan base-camp. This is also one of the major reasons why exotic cultures haven't infiltrated to this region. Generally in villages, mountaineers represent an important media of intellectual, economic and social communication, whereas Dolpo has been isolated from these influences.

The people in this valley were not keen to be porters. They were very happy with their cattle and agriculture. They seldom went down to Pokhara to get the highly-paid job of porter. They were very afraid of "aulo", the lowland disease, malaria. They restricted their yearly movements as far as Jomosom in the east, and Tarakot and Dunie in the south. They believed that lower than Jomosom, which was at 9,000 feet was a land of "aulo." They didn't realize that "aulo" came from the bite of certain kinds of mosquitos, but thought that it came from the heat. They had no idea that malaria had been eradicated and that they could survive there just as easily as others could. They were not very keen to know all this. They had no worries, no mental tension. Their dreams had never risen to limitless heights as city-dwellers' do. They had no knowledge of luxury and happiness of the material world. They were happy here, fully content. Their problems were all minor, if indeed they had any at all; for these they would instantly cry and then forget why they were crying. Their whole world was within the four walls of these naked mountains, where they were born, lived and fated to die. The only happiness and sorrows of their lives were their agriculture and immense faith in their religion.

Most of the houses displayed the religious devotion of the people. Whilst standing in the narrow alleys between the houses I could see a monastery perched high above. We answered the

beckoning call of this monastery called Shey Gumpa and made our way up to it. This Gumpa was much smaller in the size than Chaykang, but it had many more elaborate paintings. As it was quite close to the village many worshippers came there. Its flat roof was made from mud plaster and was enclosed by a wall to form a balcony. Prayer flags were fixed near the chimney.

In front of the porch of the monastery was rock pyre about five feet tall. On top of the pyre there was a huge pair of antlers from a Tibetan stag. With the permission of the caretaker of the monastery we took down one of the antlers which stood about one hundred and twentyfive centimetres and had a very thick base. The caretaker said this antler had been collected near the Tibetan border, where he still believed in the existence of the Great Tibetan stag. In Tibetan language, this animal *Cervus elaphus wallichii*, is called "shawa." From the size of the antler, it was difficult to imagine the size of the massive head it must have to hold such a gigantic pair of antlers.

When I thought about the periodic shedding of the antlers, I imagined that nature had relieved the poor stag from carrying the huge antlers for its entire life. Considering nature's beautiful art work in the creation of these branching antlers, it was puzzling why she should devote so much imagination to the creation of what had to perish. Compared to its cousin, the Kashmir stag *Cervus elaphus hunglu* and to the European red deer *Cervus elaphus*, this ruminant's antlers were bigger.

The man informed us that this "shawa" grazed in the meadows in herds of four to five, but he had never seen it, nor heard of any record of it near the Nepalese border line. This is not a scientific confirmation of the distribution of the shawa in this vast region. I believe that scientific study still needs to be done in this little studied area.

The Dolpo zone remains the mysterious land of the country. It is still blank from the point of view of nature history. According to zoo-geographical distributions, this region is regarded as the only region on the earth's surface where both desert and arctic conditions are coherently displayed. Due to micro-climatic factors accompanying the tremendous gain of altitude and being rain-shadowed by the Great Himalayan barrier, it functions surprisingly as a transitional zone between the Indian sub-continent and Europe as well as Central Asia. All the flora and fauna have marked characteristics of Europe and Central Asia. This practically semi-desert, or almost treeless Dolpo, although it extends only up to the Tibetan frontier in Nepal, extends as a zone of scanty rainfall, intense cold, bare peaks and plateaus up two thousand miles as far as the waste land of Siberia*. This Dolpo is not only the transitional region for two important zoo-geographical realms, but Bob Fleming believes it also comes under the zonation where western and eastern forms of the great Himalayas are available. This latter phenomenon is exemplified in the distribution of bird-life.

In connection with knowing more about the animal distribution here, we invited the caretaker of the monastery to our camp-site. The short and stocky middle-aged man with whom I had great difficulty to communicate in Nepali, followed us very happily to the camp. We called the Gurung boy and Nima to interpret for us. John was very interested to know about the snow leopared *Panthera uncia* and we expected this man to give us a lot of information on the animal. John strongly believed that when there was such a high concentration of blue sheep, there must definitely be a good number of snow leopard in the area. Seeing John's enthusiasm about the snow leopard and remembering the old man at Tarakot saying that if we were

*Nicholson, N., Through Kali Ghandaki Gorge, The Himalayas.

lucky we would see the snow leopard between Ringmo and Shey, my interest in this animal was aroused. We put a series of questions to the caretaker about the snow leopard. He hadn't yet seen any live snow leopards in his life, but he knew many people who had seen it. Although his answers on this animal's behaviour were vague, it became quite clear that some animals definitely lived here. He was not very interested in wild-life: whenever we asked him a question through Nima, instead of relaying the question, Nima would spontaneously reply himself. We requested Nima to ask the man instead of giving his own replies, but the man always had his eyes hovering over to our kitchen. Because of his greedy gestures Nima became angry with him and at times yelled at him. I'm sure that Nima's temper was mainly because he was jealous of the importance we were giving to the other man.

The topic of this beautiful cat didn't stop when he left our camp without having supplied any useful information. We kept on talking about it all evening, asking casual questions of Nima and other porters who proved to be much more informative than the local people. It was quite difficult to figure out how animals lived in this area from such sources of information. Through these conversations we gathered some useful information on their scent, scattings and composition of the droppings. At times a distinct picture of the solitary snow leopard with snow white fur decorated with rosettes flashed in my imagination in various poses: waiting crouched and leaping at its prey.

Later on in Kathmandu, I had some interesting meetings when I was confronted with a few incidences concerning specialists of these beautiful animals. The first meeting was with Dr. George Schallers, a renowned wild-life biologist and one of the world's few authorities on the snow leopard. It was he who snapped the world famous picture of the snow leopard in Hunja. When

I met him his soft language, reserved personality and thin body did not really convey an image of the world's foremost biologist, but his name impressed me psychologically and made this meeting an unforgettable incident. I still feel quite proud that John and I suggested to him a few areas for study, one of them being Shey where George came to carry out scientific studies on blue sheep and the snow leopard. Although he couldn't stay very long, his report on blue sheep was superb and in that report he guessed the population of snow leopard to be six in an area of one hundred and fifty square miles. After George left Nepal, I met another cat specialist, Mel Sunquist from the Smithsonian Institution. Mel had been engaged by Dr. George Schallers for a radio tagging operation on the snow leopard in Afghanistan. Tall, thin and bearded, with a pipe constantly in his mouth, Mel said with a big sense of humour that he received a letter from George in America. He asked him to take such and such a flight to Kabul, then to take a certain train and at some station to get down and meet a man who would arrange porters for him; then to go to Chitral and from there meet another man who would, take him for a few day's walk to the study area. Somewhere in that mountain he would meet George, who would be there only for a certain period. Mel had never been to Asia before and became a bit nervous, but to have the opportunity of working with a man like George Schallers he accepted all forthcoming difficulties. He collected his radios, tranquilizing gun, and did everything as he said. Finally and with the great difficulty he arrived at the said high mountain of Chitral, but there was no sign of George Schallers and all he found was a piece of paper on which George had written, "You stock the bait for the leopard and when you can tag a radio on it, send me a telex to this area where I am engaged in some other wild-life project." Loyal Mel waited in the caves of the high mountains in Chitral for the snow leopard to come to his bait. He stayed there obediently for three months in the snow,

facing gales and intense cold but the shy snow leopard turned up. Poor Mel went back to America, without seeing either the snow leopard or the great George Schallers.

The other interesting man crazy about the snow leopard was Ron Jackson who want to see George Schallers because of his interest in a study of the snow leopard. George Schallers asked him if he had a Ph. D. and when he said "no", George simply walked off. Poor Ron was stunned for a while, but was not discourage to come to Nepal to study this lovely cat. He went west of Dolpo behind the Kanji Roba in the Namlung area. He couldn't see any snow leopard, but came back with some information on this animal, as well as on the status of other animals such as musk deer and blue sheep. He estimated there to be about five leopard in an area of one hundred and sixty to two hundred square miles. People shoot this animal for the fur which now has very little market and can hardly get two hundred rupees. Namlung, which is also in the Trans-Himalayan region, can be a good place for the home of this threatened ruminant if proper protection is taken against hunting. He put out baits in many places and one was taken by a snow leopard. He thinks these cats use relatively well defined trails and have a wide range of movement. On the track he found the scentings but pug marks disappeared in the stones and pebbles. More than 75% of the droppings consisted of blue sheep hair. I didn't know if I could see a snow leopard, but if I did, that would be the most exciting day of my life.

It was quite delightful to be on the move again after such a long time in one spot. Nima came and helped me dismantle my tent. By this stage we had become quite attached to each other. He always came forward to give his hand to help and inform me. With our constant companionship we developed a good communication without really having a language barrier.

Our own language was not completely based on words but it was composed of varying intonations combined with facial expressions and hand gestures. Nima seldom lagged behind me, although he was almost four times more heavily laden than I. Whenever I went ahead and sat down to rest, Nima would appear there with a wide smile, much earlier than any of the porters. He would put his head load on a raised mound of ground and wipe off the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. He would blow out all his tiredness in the form of whistles. Whenever I smiled at him and asked him a question, he would repeat the same phrases again and again like an orphan child, eager to receive attention and flattered by even small affection. Once, some time back, I saw a huge pile of pebbles on a pass we were crossing. I asked Nima, "What will happen if we don't throw a rock onto the pile." Not fully grasping the meaning of my question, he said that we had to circle around on the left hand side and whosoever passed had to throw a stone there. I knew this and I knew one had to throw a stone but I didn't know what this meant. Nima didn't succeed in answering my question properly. But after that day whenever we came across a pile of rocks on our trail, he always showed it to me and repeated the same thing, saying "Whosoever passes has to throw a stone and circle to the left." I never tired of his repeated answers and always learnt something from him. On the route, he hardly ever overtook me and if he did, he waited for me and gave me some kind of information on what was ahead. So he was a really great personal guide.

Lal Bahadur brought tea. I sat on a rock and while I was sipping it, Nima properly rolled up my sleeping bag, camp cot and tent. He learnt this art after watching me for a long time and after several experiences of packing. When he finished packing, he looked at me seeking approval of his packing methods. I said to him in English, 'Nima, you are now a champion !' He

pretended to be shy at my appreciative comments and like a child he looked at his feet, walking this way and that way with utter happiness, nodding his head and murmuring gaily, "Champion, champion."

Bob and John left the camp ahead of us and I went off from the camp with all the porters. Our trail went sometimes a little to the north or a little to the east, but our destination was always to the south. Passing the village of Shey, situated below the trail, we gradually followed the contours of the buttressed rolling hills. The infinite world before our eyes was the same again—desert where sand particles were now solidified into stones and rocks. Walking hours and days in this monotonous land of an eternal cradle of rocks, we found the journey mostly prosaic. There was no soil to hold the wild flowers of heaven. In this naked world I could see miles of faint serpentine trail, full of dust and fine pebbles. All of us walked in single file; there was complete silence except for the porter's breathing. Bob and John were quite ahead of us, so that the porters would not disturb the peace and tranquility of the route and frighten away the bird and animal life.

In the midst of the silence I heard the faint hissing sound of a gun as a bullet shuddered against the rock ending in a dull shrill sound. The sound of the bullet came so quickly and disappeared instantly with no resonance or echo. I walked fast, taking side paths, curious to see what Bob had shot in this lifeless region.

It was a Tibetan twit *Acanthis flavirostis*. This was drab brown bird, the size of a sparrow. I saw a few others flying at about ground level. Some of them, Bob said, were Hume's short-toed lark *Calandrella acutirostris*. These completely different species of bird, but very similar in appearance, were flying in one flock. When they rested on the ground, it was hard for the naked eye to pick them out from the background of the rocks.

I observed them through my binocular and I couldn't really notice any difference between the two species. I thought larks had a crest, like skylarks, but this species was completely similar to many other small brown birds of the Himalayas. I was as usual quite impressed by Bob's uncanny knowledge of bird life.

After walking for three hours along uneven slopes of rock filled areas, we approached a pass where our altimetre read 17,000 feet. We never realized the up-gradient of the route because of the elongated rolling topography. On the pass I thought that from now on we would find some meadows and see some greenery, so I looked all around in the next valley, hoping to paint my sight with the colours of life again, but my hopes sank to see miles of the same dead world. The whole appearance of this desert bio-type was lifeless and perched under a galaxy of blue sky doming the drab and colourless horizon. There were no snow-capped mountains or patches of snow to cool down our roasted minds and heated psychic imaginations. The atmosphere, although dry and cold at this high altitude, could not penetrate the goose-flesh on our skins. We were not tired, nor were we thirsty, but our thoughts were frantically searching for a cool site, colourfully flower-dotted meadows, spongy rock plants and drifting forest streams.

Travelling in the Sahara, one knows one must walk for many long days before arriving at an oasis and one does not await it psychologically with great impatience, but here in the highest desert of the world, our expectations of finding our oasis were so strong that very soon we were waiting anxiously to arrive at some green peaceful spot. We were desperately searching for a lunch-break site but there was no sign of water. Whenever we headed towards a valley we expected to find a few drops of water, at least enough for cooking lunch. We came down quickly through a narrow trail, passing valleys and gulleys. Nima perhaps under-

stood that my eyes hovering for a camp site and came to my side, tugging at my shirt. I looked back at him. His head was bowed down by the pressure of the load held by a strap across his forehead. He raised his eyes to me and said, "Namgum down below, near, near," pointing his finger down to the valley. From the ridge where we were walking I could not see any sign of village, but I could imagine that the Namgum river must be flowing down in the valley, hidden by the criss-crossing of the mountains. It was in fact quite a short, although steep descent before the small village of Namgum appeared, perched on the bank of a river. There were not many houses, and not many people either. Near the village area we stopped for lunch with the hope of getting water and buying fuel wood in the village. We didn't know that the source of water was at some distance. Poor Angmo had to go off with two buckets to search for water. Lal Bahadur asked Angmo, as the kitchen helper, to bring the water back as soon as possible; perhaps he was also thirsty for a refreshing cup of tea. Angmo looked all around hopefully for the Gurung boy to help her carry the water. A little way up the gentle slope, the Gurung boy was collapsed on the ground, legs spread out wide and his arms folded behind his head; he understood her gestures. A wide grin spread across his face; he went towards her and took one of the pails. Both of them were happy to be once again away from the group even for a short time. When Lal Bahadur noticed both of them going for water he jokingly remarked, with more than a little touch of jealousy, "Don't get yourselves lost, we need water very soon," Angmo now enjoyed any comment pertaining to her romantic affairs with the Gurung boy. She looked back to Lal Bahadur and pretended to be angry, throwing an empty bucket at him but all the time smiling widely. Both Angmo and the Gurung boy, almost touching, like Jack and Jill, went down the hill to fetch their pails of water. When they came back Jack didn't fall down but Jill dropped her pail when she slipped on the path and everyone laughed;

but this mountain Jack picked her up, took the empty bucket and went down again to fetch water. As usual, the smartest thing Lal Bahadur did was to prepare tea very quickly.

We had still not seen any meadows, but here and there tufts of grass were growing in the gaps between rocks and among those tufts potentilla with a bright yellow flower *Potentilla arbuscula* showed its head. On the river bank I was quite surprised to see tall green salix trees growing. The agricultural land was covered with dark grey soil where barley was grown. The people had irrigated this land by diverting the upper stream.

We wanted to camp in this place but it was too early. We studied the map contours towards Saldang which didn't look too far off. We decided to move on there, thinking that if we couldn't reach there in time, we would pitch our camp in another suitable area. We walked down to Saldang village, where the trail followed exactly as before, but with less rock. Most of the land was eroded with a lot of gulley formation and along the gulleys we could see several inches of grey and dark conglomerated rocks. I couldn't imagine how this erosion might have been caused when there was scanty rain and no river system. I guessed that the gulley system was very old and that the erosion had commenced very long ago when a snow fed river was flowing.

We arrived in Saldang well in time. The valley was deserted compared to Shey. Saldang is a totally isolated village situated on the southern bank of the Namdo river. Every house looked like a fort or castle with no windows. The houses were quite big and made of conglomerates of mud and lime stone. The hills on the northern bank of the river were completely blank with deep long gullies and the landscape on that side of the river reminded me of a picture of Arizona. Near our campsite there was a big old Chorten the inside of which was elaborately painted,

although all the colours had faded. Nearby the villagers had made a water hole by scraping into the dry mountain. The water spout was made out of a flat slate rock. The water was icy-cold. The evening was beautiful with a perfectly clear sky.

I sent Nima off with a couple of rupees to buy wood from the village, which was a little below our campsite. He came back with a bigger stack of wood than I expected. Nima built a camp fire right next to my tent. All the porters went down to the big Chorten and cooked their food themselves. Nima cooked his food on the camp fire in a small pot. He boiled the water first and after he put in two handfuls of sampa from his dirty striped yak wool bag. He added some chips of dried yak curd which was very popular among the Tibetans. This curd, in fine strips, is good for nibbling like snacks. It tastes a little sour and smelly but once it is soaked with the saliva in the mouth, it becomes very milky. Nima knew I liked this dried yak curd so he always offered me some with respect, extending both his hands together, palms upwards. Lal Bahadur brought me dinner in my tent, half of which I gave to Nima. In fact I had become a little fed up with all the meals as they were made of canned meat. We had rice and dal, but I was not used to eating only this without green vegetables or fresh meat curry. Nima took my share with obvious enjoyment.

I wanted to know if Nima had anyone in this world who cared that he had travelled such a great distance. He was quite a young man, although he looked very old. He wasn't sure of his age; he didn't know his horsoscope, nor had he ever celebrated his birthday. He was the eldest son of his parents, whom he had lost when he was very young. Nima didn't really have any proper relatives, except his wife and brother. All the individuals of Tarap village were everything for him— relatives, neighbours and friends. He was married to a girl from the same village and

whom he shared with his younger brother. Realizing Nima's polyandry, I was very curious to know their feelings on the matrimonial relationship. I knew that Tibetan people had a polyandrous system but I had never been able to conceive how two or more men could share one woman as their wife. Nima wasn't ashamed by my questions. He explained to me that he and his younger brother shared the same wife, as otherwise marriage would be too expensive. I was surprised to hear Nima saying that one reason was that if he died, his blood brother would take care of his wife so that no other man, except his brother, would ever sleep with her. It seemed quite illogical to me, but at the same time I could see the depth of his love for his wife.

Previously I thought Tibetan people followed this system as there was a lack of women, but in fact this was the result of economic and emotional factors and the system probably continued as a social custom. It was not common practice for everyone but it was sufficiently frequent for it to be quite acceptable. Nima had a premarital sexual relationship with his wife and he knew that a few other men had also slept with his wife, but now after marriage, he was very strict about his wife's loyalty. He could not even stand for a man to look covetously at her, nor even to think of his wife involved with any other man. Nima's chauvinistic feelings were so strong that I was able to understand his acceptance of the polyandrous situation with his brother, in whom the same blood flowed. I asked Nima how he felt when his wife slept with his brother and he said plainly "nothing," I have seen them making love many times and often we all sleep naked in the same room." For some time Nima with his wild face, wispy moustache and matted hair glowing in the light of the camp-fire looked to me like a naked animal or a pre-historic man.

I asked him about his wife's reactions. When she married Nima, she was quite aware of all these things and so was his

younger brother. These three people were involved in the complexity of polyandry within one year of marriage, although his wife was older than his younger brother. They had no children yet, but if they did, they wouldn't know if it was Nima's or his brother's child. Nima said very democratically that the father of his wife's child would be common of himself and his brother.

After talking about his family life I conjured up in my mind many strange thoughts and psycho-analysis of these people, but it is a world of millions of different kinds of people and a great number of varied ethnic cultures. I'm sure that if Nima knew that in Kathmandu a man used to have two or three wives and some even had a harem system and that Muslims encouraged first cousins to marry and that in the west people divorced quite easily then he would have been equally surprised as I now was.

This was not just an isolated story that I knew. There was a particular Newari family in Kathmandu the head of which was a rich business man, selling a lot of merchandise from Kathmandu in Tibet. The four sons of this businessman went to Tibet one after the other, staying three or four years at a time. The first brother went, leaving his wife in Kathmandu and married another Tibetan wife who virtually did all the business. After him he was replaced by his brother who started living with the same woman. Similarly, the third and fourth also lived with her. The age difference between the Tibetan lady and youngest brother was almost like that between mother and son. By the time the youngest brother went, all Nepalese businessmen had to leave Tibet because of its new political situation. The younger brother came back to Kathmandu with a wife and a step daughter elder than he. In this case, the system of polyandry occurred because the lady was a business-lady and a hard worker,

helping more actively in the business than any of the brothers. Another reason must be that all the brothers were quite young and newly married in Kathmandu, when they were sent, so it must have been difficult for them to live without sex. And this Tibetan lady was easily available to them. For the brothers, the system must have been new, but the Tibetan lady accepted it as a duty. Another case was of a very good Tibetan friend of mine who had a most beautiful wife whom he shared happily with his nephew so that they could have a baby as he himself was sterile. So I realized that different forms of polyandry occurred for so many different reasons which were personal, economic and social. It were not solely dependent on social custom.

I was in the tent rolled up in the sleeping bag and Nima was warming himself by the camp fire while he was telling me his intimate story. Next morning after breakfast, we made sure all the camp fires were put out and all the rubbish buried. The porters were no longer interested in collecting the cans and bottle to keep. Previously whenever we discarded tins the porters would race each other to collect them, but by this time we had opened so much canned food that the porters had become fed up with keeping all the tins. Some of the smart porters traded the empty cans for food.

We took a side route to go down to the valley of Pungmo river without passing through the village. We crossed the Pungmo torrent and checked the altimetre; it read 13,100. feet. The gradient in this area was comparatively much steeper than yesterday's countryside. We found that today it took quite an effort to climb up to the saddle of a pass at 15,000 feet. The scenery on the other side of the pass was really breath-taking. From here we could see the multiple ranges of rolling barren hills. This was the land of the forbidden autonomous Tibet of the People's Republic of China. From here the frontier line was hardly a few miles away

and I wondered if the international demarcation pillars had been built somewhere in those mountains. I could't see any natural demarcation between the two countries such as a river or water-shed mountains. This area has a single complete natural biom, although on the map there is a line drawn through this biom making two different countries in the world. I was thrilled to know that I was so near Tibet, the land which had been so often in my thoughts since childhood. I still rememered, how when my maternal grand-father visited Tibet, all his family cried bitterly as if he had gone off on a long journey to the land of death.

From the saddle of the pass we headed down to the east. After descending a little we observed something like muddy outgrowths in the valley. The porters said this was Koma village. It was much greener than Saldang. The greenery of the valley was not because of the cultivation, but because of the natural landscape filled with meadows with velvety grass. On the way down, Bob shot a snow partridge *Lerwa lerwa* and a Tibetan snow finch *Montifringilla adamsi*. I thought that the partridge would be for dinner but miserly Bob stuffed it for his collection. We looked for other partidges, but could't find any. Instead of partridges we found a very beautiful small bird, imperceptible in the grass, the highland black red start *Phoenicrous ochruros*. This bird's habitat is completely different to that of the plumbus red start *Rhyacornis fuliginosus*, which always lives by mountain streams in forested area. About the size of a sparrow, the male looks very different to the female and neither of them look as black as the name implies. Brown and chestnut colours pre-dominate over the whole body and only the head is much darker than rest of the body. The bill and legs are jet black. The frequent shivering habit of its tail, Bob said is the field identification of this species of red start. It is a typical common European species, but here its distribution is confined only to monsoon

rain-shadowed barren valleys of the Trans-Himalayan region. The surroundings of Koma goan looked more active in nature history. In the meadows, for the first time we noticed a beautiful pink flower, the Tibetan primula *Primula tibetica*, and some other species of primulas such as yellow tall primulas *Primula sikkimensis*, white primulas *Primula involucreta*.

Coming down to Koma goan, situated at 14,000 feet we had to cross a rivulet by a wooden bridge and then we started climbing up the hill again. On the way I met a lady from this village carrying a baby on her back. She was surprisingly well dressed and her personality expressed her wealth. Her jet black hair was neatly and tightly combed and highly oiled. The knot on the back of her head was fixed with a very elaborate wooden hair clip. Her neck was fully adorned with a most beautiful pigeon-blood coloured coral, bright blue turquoise and in the centre the "jhhi", the most precious stone of Tibet. This "jhhi" is an elongated solid brown stone with symmetrical white lines. It is in fact a type of hard agate found in the middle core of rocks of Tibet, around which are centred many legends. It is believed that "jhhi" is the dropping of some kind of bird of paradise and some people believe that the stone has a spiritual life. This stone, with coral and turquoise are a beautiful combination and represent the three most precious stones for Tibetan people. Tibetan coral is supposedly the oldest coral of the world. Previously the whole Himalayan range and Tibetan plateau were under the ocean. Some 70,000,000 years ago in the Mesozoic era the region pushed itself up to join the Indian continent and Asia.

After climbing this hill we arrived in a huge valley. Our trail followed along the middle of the contours of the highest mountains of this area. Here again, the grasslands disappeared and everywhere there were sharp edged rocks. Every piece looked

as if it were freshly broken from a big quarry. Sometimes I pondered deeply on the probable reasons for the parent rock breaking into such uniform pieces. The most important process of denudation of the rocks in this area must be by the powerful influence of frosts. No rock is absolutely impervious to water and when moisture or water in the pores or crevices becomes frozen, it expands and exerts great pressure upon the wall of the space in which it is confined. By alternate thawing and freezing the rocks gradually crack. Frost action is the most disintegrating agent in nature. Heaps of broken rocks generally at the foot crag of these mountains might be due chiefly to this cause. The sharpness of the fresh rock is perhaps maintained as there is no wind erosion.

Walking along the contour line, lost in thoughts on these geological formations, I heard the sound of a call, quite loud and ringing. I looked all over to see from where the sound was coming, but I could'nt trace any bird. From the sound I guessed it must be a large bird. It was a Tibetan snow cock Tetra *Ogallus tibetanus* perched on a big rock about one hundred feet above our trail, completely motionless and which I picked out with great difficulty from the background. I watched it with my binocular and I noticed that the bird was bobbing its head from side to side, oblivious to our presence. It was about the size of a medium chicken, completely white on the breast with frequent black striping. When it gave a call, I could see the vibrations of its vocal cords. To get a closer view, I climbed up near the bird, its sight seemed very poor; it had not yet seen us. I'm sure its eyesight must have been pretty accurate for predators like eagles, although these are far too smaller than man. When I came quite close to it, as soon as it noticed me it flew to the up hill-side.

From here the contoured trail followed down slowly from

one ridge to another like a serpent. After an hour and a half of this kind of trail we started our descent to the valley. From the east ridge we could see Semen Gaon. From here, the small village looked like a green emerald in an open desert. It looked animatedly green; it was an oasis in this alpine desert. Whilst descending we could see the turbulent Chelachun river flowing in the valley. The water in this river was incredibly transparent and so clear that it invited us for bathing. Our body temperature was quite normal but the unbelievable limpidity of the water persuaded us to bathe. It was lunch time, so what more heavenly place to stop for a break ?

I took off my clothes and wanted to plunge into the crystal backriver waters, but the moment I dipped my feet in, I found it was icy cold. I didn't have the courage to immerse my whole body and the most I could do was to scoop up water in my cupped hands and splash it over my body. I shivered, but I really needed a bath. Most of my body, especially my neck and thighs, were very dirty. With the help of my towel, I first gave myself a sponge bath and dried completely in the heat of the scorching sun. All the dirt on my body accumulated over the last couple of weeks became moistened with the sponge bath and after a while, several layers of dirt peeled off on my towel when I rubbed. Each time I saw the dirt coming off my body I was greatly satisfied. I was never conscious of my body odour, but I'm sure that with so much dirt coming off, if some clean, freshly scrubbed person had met me, he would have thought I had a typical Tibetan odour. Gradually, I came to tolerate the cold of the water and gritting my teeth, I suddenly immersed myself. Once I was fully dipped I could keep going under again and again. I washed my head and body with soap several times and when I had finished and dried off, I felt the new clean smoothness of my skin. My greasy hair had now become quite silky. I had never felt so clean in my life. When I put my same old shirt, pants and socks back

on, my sense of smell became so sensitive that I could smell the stale perspiration in my shirt and undershirt. I wished that I could wear a complete fresh set of clothes.

Lunch was prepared by one of the porters from Kathmandu; Lal Bahadur was also busy today, bathing in the river. Everyone looked quite fresh. John was skinny dipping, way up from our site so that no-one could see him naked. All the porters knew how he was bathing. So no one of them followed him, as they believed that the sight of anybody's genital organs would prove to be unlucky for the whole day. The Tibetan porters especially, giggled amongst themselves in their language about how he could bathe naked. Bob had completely adopted the Nepalese way of living and so he didn't have this problem.

After lunch we left the camp and headed towards the east, passing through beautiful Semen Gaon. This 12,400 foot village was very large. Not many people were around the village. Most of them had gone out to watch their animals grazing. As the village lay on the bank of the Chelachon, the land surrounding it was well cultivated and irrigated with lines from the up-hill side of the river. The main crop here was barley, but wheat and potatoes were also grown. We bought some potatoes from the village and the porters bought sampa which is ground, roasted barley; they said it was much cheaper here than in any other village. Along the irrigated channels and road side the abundance of salix made the village very green. The inhabitants were all Gurungs by ethnic classification, but their life style was completely influenced by Tibetan culture.

After lunch we marched towards the east where the trail followed all along the river side. The exposed river banks showed conglomerate formation of round pebbles. We did not enter Semen village and just cast our eye over the vicinity. Walking on the wide exposed trail with the powerful sun blazing down

made us very hot. Within a short time we were perspiring heavily. After the beautiful bath in the icy cold clear water, the temperatures of our bodies rose very sharply. There was no shade on the trail, except on the side which was covered with small bushes like *Caragana gradiana*, *Berberis* and *Cotoneaster* species. There was no breeze at all to dry our sweat. I took off my shirt but the blazing sun burnt my back and shoulders. Walking on the trail we could see the beautiful clear river water with no obstruction. Each time our sight fell on the appetising water, we felt like diving in to cool down. How nice it would be if the trail followed along the river bank, so that we could dive into the water like mountain dippers ! This whole valley had a peculiar landscape, very new on this trip. Huge chains of bare steep mountains with different sets of geological formations displayed a spectrum of colours from reddish brown to drab and slatey. In some places an eye-catching red showed up remarkably on the black mountains. The gorges were quite deep and narrow and down below the busy river flowed turbulently, dashing against the huge river rocks with a thunderous sound. The gradient of the river bed was very steep so the current made the water cascade and leap over the round boulders of the river-bed, forming and breaking millions of silver bubbles. These chains continued forever. The width of the valley narrowed as we marched forward. Finally this narrowing valley ended in a saddle between towering cliffs. This pass proved to be a gateway to another valley with a landscape as opulent as before.

Today's trek, although difficult and hot, proved to be a noteworthy section of our trail. We observed many tiny mouse hares *Ochotona royeli* on the open ground under rocks and piles of stones, feeding on grass and sometimes peeping at us curiously. We noticed quite interesting bird life on the way—the white breasted brown dipper *Cinclus cinclus* in the turbulent waters of the Chelachon river, sometimes dipping under the cascade and

sometimes perched on submerged rocks, its legs covered by water. Down from our trail we saw in the gorge several flocks of chocolate brown crag martins *Lirundo rupestris* flying restlessly in zigzag patterns. Their wing span stretched wider than their body length, exhibiting the peculiar characteristic of the swallow and martin families. Their nests are usually situated in cliffs and holes of rocks. In the same valley of the wild Chelachon river we were very surprised to see a tropical bird from the king crow family, the hair crested drongo *Dicrurus hottentottus*. This jet black glossy bird was common, flying frequently amongst the red flowering silk cotton trees *Salmaria malabaricum* in the lowland tarai region. To see this bird in a wild state at such a high altitude confused me for some time and prevented me from recognizing it. Bob confirmed its identification; I tried to look at its crested hair with my binocular, but it was invisible. The location of this bird in this pocket was an example of the co-existence of Indian sub-continent and European bio-types. Bob was also quite surprised to see this tropical bird at an unusual altitude of immense cold. The golden eagle *Aquila chrysaetos* glided across high in the sky and sometimes down to the valley. This giant eagle, although its name mentions gold, is in fact black and brown with white patches on the wings. We frequently saw the king of the Himalayan sky—the lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*. Whenever I saw this bird, I always considered it as an eagle, although its other name is bearded vulture. When it soared its huge wing span of three metres, reduced with ocular observation made it look like a kite or a bird of prey. When it glided down we could see its distinct beard and huge wing span. This magnificent Himalayan bird can be grouped between eagles and vultures, but as this is my favourite high mountain bird, I am more prejudiced to class it as an eagle, because of its feathered neck. This bird, one of the popular names of which is “Ossi frag” or bone-breaker, feeds on bones and carion. When it cannot swallow the piece of bone it takes it high

up and drops it onto rocks, feeding on the broken pieces. John said that one of his friends in Africa had succeeded in photographing this bird by tying a bone with a thin nylon thread and hiding himself. The lammergeier, greedy for the bone, swooped down to snatch it and as it flew up, the strong nylon thread stopped it from going very high and the lammergeier hovered, reluctant to throw away the bone it had picked up. The photographer took this opportunity to take a picture from his hiding place. John said that when the bone-breaking eagle couldn't snap the thread at its first try, it swooped down low and again exerting all its force, thrust upwards, breaking the nylon thread as it stretched to its elastic limit. People on Everest expeditions have seen the lammergeier at extreme heights of 27,000 feet. It is hard to imagine why a bird will fly at such a height where there is no food. Perhaps the answer to this can be given by another Jonathan like the one who presented the story of the living seagull.

Today's march was quite long and we were exhausted by the heat, so we gave up the hope of reaching Tinge and searched for a good camp-site. The trail was patchily covered with honey suckle, with a peduncle of white flower above and pink flower below. In some places we saw the golden yellow caragana flower. I was quite ahead of the rest of the party, still looking for a suitable place to camp, when all of a sudden I saw a Himalayan golden weasel *Mustela siberica* pass very close by. I never expected any animal to come to view, but this weasel's rapid movements made me start from my dreams. My heart started beating heavily, not from fear, but from the sudden spasm of surprise. It was a little bigger than a mongoose and quite bright yellow in colour. It must have been looking for birds' eggs or reptiles, but it leapt away very fast and disappeared quickly.

I found a beautiful camp-site, next to which there was an

overhanging rock for the porters to sleep under. If we were keen we could make it to Tinge, but everyone was very tired and this camp was inviting. Next day we arrived in Tinge before ten in the morning. The landscape of this village was set amidst alpine meadows, thickly covered with velvety grass. The valleys in this region were very long. Tinge village was comparatively bigger than most of the villages we had come across since Shey. It was composed of two or three valleys. The south-west valley was separated from the northern one by a hill. There was an air-strip for Pilatus Porters in the southern valley. It was long enough for safe landings, but it was abandoned. In the eastern valley there were a few big houses looking like forts, which were completely deserted and some parts of the building had already fallen down. In the centre of these two valleys, the village of Tinge was situated. Most of the houses in the village had cultivated land and the village looked quite prosperous. In many places the valley was rich in rivulets which were used for irrigation. We decided to stay a little in the outskirts of Tinge village even though it was early. We were all a little worried about the porters, especially those from Kathmandu who seemed well and ate well, but who looked as though their internal energy had been exhausted and who, for no apparent reason, tired quickly. I'm sure that the deterioration of their health was due to lack of protein. Another reason for our decision to make Tinge our camp was that we had no further plan for progression. Our ultimate goal was in fact to go to Jomosom and from there, via Thakhola, to Pokhara.

We would go to Jomosom by two important routes— one via Charka-Bhot and the other via Mukat gaon. The porters were worried that we would take the longer route, as many of Kathmandu porters were by now very homesick and wanted to return as soon as possible. If we took the route via Charka-Bhot it would take six days to reach Jomosom from here, whereas the

the route via Mukat would take almost ten days. Bob, John and I studied the area in the map to see how long the routes were and how many passes we would have to cross. As we had a whole day in Tinge, we didn't want to decide hastily, as time, the porters, situation and the food situation all had to be considered. We felt that we had to go via short route. Lal Bahadur cooked lunch. He warned us that our provisions were not enough for a long time. I checked our stock and I saw that he wasn't wrong. We had really consumed quite a lot of food.

After lunch we went to explore Tinge. Most of the land in this valley was divided into small holdings by rock walls, but the land inside the boundaries lay quite fallow. In the field there were hundreds of Turkestan hill pigeons *Columba rupestris* in many flocks, flying and resting on the open ground. We wanted to see a huge fort-like building on the extreme north east of the valley. We walked all along the fields covered with brown soil. To arrive at the building, we had to cross several demarcation walls. Approaching the fort, we saw a Tibetan hare *Lepus capensis*, scampering across fallow land with big leaps towards the fort. I ran after it to observe it more closely, but it disappeared behind the fort. It was a brown hare, with a dark distinct tail. The fort, or whatever this construction was, was most impressive. The massive walls were still standing, but the roof had disintegrated. We speculated considerably on the purpose of this construction, but it was difficult to imagine why such a stronghold would have been built in this unproductive desert and then abandoned.

We came back to our camp, merrily driving off with our hands the many flocks of pigeons. At the camp we found that some of the porters from Tarap wanted to go back from here. In fact their departure did not really create a problem for us as everyone's food had already been reduced. We realized that we

had a surplus of porters for the last two or three days, but we didn't want to ask them to leave and were awaiting their voluntary departure. The Tarap porters, including Angmo and Nima, were hoping that we would take the Mukut Himal route, as from there they would have been very near to their village. When we came back they hesitantly requested us to work out their wages and give them the permission to leave the party. I asked to stay one night with us before we made a final decision on our route, but two of the male porters from Tarap were quite keen to leave the party and camp the night somewhere along the trail, so that they could reach their village pretty soon. It seemed that they didn't want to take a risk on our perplexity.

Angmo was in a sad state of confusion: two of her local friends asked her to come with them, but poor Angmo had already developed a sympathetic relationship with the Gurung boy and was most reluctant to leave him. Angmo and her two friends had a big argument on what to do. Finally she decided to stay with our party, but even then she was still worried and was uncertain if she had done right or wrong. The Gurung boy was quite happy with her decision. We gave the porters their wages and John gave them some "backsis" (tip). They were very happy with us and left the camp, taking their rations and a collection of bottles and empty tin cans. Angmo was still worried and went quite a way with them to say good-bye.

When the two porters left, our plan to go via Charka strengthened. Finally, after more discussions we decided to take this same route, considering the health of all the porters and the possibility of the diverse ecology we would find along the way. Lal Bahadur prepared dinner quite early and a few people from the village surrounded our camp. Nima and the Gurung boy drove them out. I asked Nima if he could find anyone who knew about the wild-life of this area. Although Nima didn't want

any guide he brought an old man from the village. He looked just like a shikari—tall, big-boned, with a reserved personality. He spoke in Tibetan. He sat near the camp-fire, his legs crossed and looked at everybody. Most of the time he asked Nima questions about us.

After we finished dinner I offered him some cigarettes and asked him many questions on wild-life and nature. He knew quite a lot, especially about hunting. He had even killed blue sheep by throwing big stones and hitting them on the head. He had also seen the giant “Tibetan nyan” *Ovis ammon hodgsoni*, the great Tibetan sheep, a long time ago near the Mahala Bha-jang area and he still believed there were a few heads roaming around in the high hill regions. Our eye grew wide and we picked our ears up at the mention of the name of this wonderful and great sheep of the world. Excited and with keen interest, we requested the old man to come near to us and asked the busy Gurung boy—occupied with his girl friend—to come to us and interpret as clearly as possible.

We wrote down in our note-books everything that the man said and noted the names of the places where we could see these animals. I wished I could speak Tibetan. Nima and the Gurung boy were not very able to translate his exact meanings. He also mentioned ‘jungali yak’ or wild yak *Poeghagus grunniens*. There were wild yak in the highlands beyond Charka-Bhot, extending up to the western boundary of Mustang. He thought that there were no wild yak left in this region, but he mentioned that the horn of the last wild yak which died in that area was kept on a stone pyre in the Charka area. I asked Nima to enquire and find out about all the places which the old man had mentioned. Nima seriously asked about all these areas. He looked very comical when he was serious, as though such an expression was not meant for him. I was lost for some time

imagining how rich these deserts were, where so many strange beasts of the world used to roam, whereas now they were lost or vanishing. Sometimes, my mind filled with optimistic feelings that this country was so vast, and not yet scientifically explored. Who knew if some of the lost or vanishing ruminants could still be there fighting for their existence ?

Sometimes I wondered, considering the topographical and climatic set up in this zone, why the “kyang” or Tibetan wild ass *Equus hemionus* ran in open Tibetan areas and not on the Nepal side when there was no natural barrier. This strange invisible natural barrier was sharply defined not only for the “kyang,” but also for other animals like ‘shawa”, the Tibetan stag *Cervis elaphus*, “dhowa,” the Tibetan gazelle *Procapra picticoudata* and “Chiru”, the Tibetan antelope *Panthelops hadgsoni*. The old man said that Chiru sometimes crossed the border and came into Nepal’s territory. Now he didn’t know anything about this animal’s status, if they were extinct or living in Tibet. He had a good knowledge of all these wild animals.

According to his interview, which I jotted down in my note book, I learnt that the dhowa or Tibetan gazelle is a small animal standing as tall as the length of a fore-arm, with black ringed horns about one foot in length, twisting gently upwards. It has beautiful black eyes, a white body with dark brown on the back and a very short tail. They live in open meadows near water ponds. They never drink the water of streams, only of ponds. They are very sensitive to human scent and quite difficult to hunt. They run very fast and are fairly imperceptible against the background. Hunters kill this animal only near water ponds when they come down to drink. He thought there were still Tibetan gazelles living near the Tibetan border. He saw this animal at a place called Babesa in Tibet, one full day’s walk from Charka Bhot. The Chiru or Tibetan antelope is not such a

pretty animal as the gazelle. It has a black face and swollen snout. Its size is slightly bigger and it is fatter than the dhowa. It has more or less a straight twisted horn with a curved point longer than the dhowa's. Its colour is exactly similar. It lives with dhowa but seldom integrates with them near the pond. They love to live in scraped out holes in the ground. About kyang, the Tibetan ass, he had heard little and had never seen it in his life. Mostly rich Tibetan people who had guns killed this animal for fun. He had also heard about tribesmen from Tibet who captured a herd of kyang and tamed them for domestic purposes. I couldn't believe this, but he said it so confidently that I was rather inclined to believe him. The description of the nayan was pretty close to the popular picture of the Tibetan sheep and the Marco Polo sheep. It is a big wild sheep with a most spectacular size and shape of horns, which are magnificently curled in a full circle. They live in rocky crags and stone-filled areas where their body colour can blend into the background with a natural protective camouflage.

From the conversations we had with this old man of Tinge it seemed that the disappearance of these wonderful highland beasts was due mainly to hunting, but this was not done for trophies. Killing and trapping of these animals was largely due to the hunter's beliefs that they could probably be domesticated. In fact, most domesticated animals, yak, sheep and mules, on which most people depended for their livelihood, came from the same wild stock. The habitat of these animals had not reduced and was not likely to reduce in the future due to the inaccessibility of this area and the low fertility of the land. But still the main reason for the disappearance of these animals was direct human pressure.

We were very happy with this old man who gave us such a lot of information from his experience and from what he had

overheard. He knew a lot, although he was not scientifically precise. John, Bob and I agreed that Dolpo must be one of the most interesting grounds for research into unknown biological details. A study of these biological mysteries—on soaring birds, the loveliest animals, and wild flora, would be the most exciting. It would have been satisfying for us, if we'd had enough time and food, to peep behind the screen hiding these mysteries.

Now we were very eager to go to Ghyamana and look for the magnificent nayan, the sheep reputed to be one of the biggest in the world, crowned by most artistic horns. Next morning we got up early, rolled down the tents and Lal Bahadur busied himself arranging the additional load from the two Tibetan porters amongst others. Each porter was quite concerned about his load and none of them wanted to be the slightest bit heavier than the others. Most of them were thin, with sun tanned faces and skin peeling off their noses and cheeks like boiled potatoes. The thin, straggly beards and moustaches on sunken temples and cheeks, make them look quite sick. They never realized how much flesh they had shed from their frames, nor did they realize that they were unhealthy, as they had no pain at all. It was apparent however that every day they became slower and weaker. The addition of two porter's load made their progress slower. We wanted to persuade the porters to hurry on, but our sympathy for them as companions stopped us from doing so although our enthusiasm to see the nayan was great. We knew that their slackness in progress was not due to laziness, or to intention on their part to drag out the trek; they really wanted to return to Kathmandu sooner than we did.

After a while we crossed the Ghyamana river. We walked all along the bank, fully covered with *lonicera* and *caragana*. Somewhere on the ground, covered with these bushes, we saw four small white eggs shining in their nest. The eggs looked

so tempting to touch that I glided my two index fingers into the nest to lift up a delicate egg. I was very sorry when it broke and walked away guiltily. After two hours of walking and after the crossing of Ghyamana river, Nima said that this was the area where the old man had meant for us to search for nayan. Without any hesitation we all decided to spend the whole day and night in this land of hope. The tired porters were very happy. The sky was quite dark with clouds, making it look later than 11 o'clock. The porters immediately spread out the big tarpaulin to give themselves shade.

The whole area of Ghyamana was completely covered by a thick mat of grass, but there were no flowers at all and the mountains took a sharp steep turn upwards after a rather rolling shape at the base. There were no rocky cliffs. I read the altitude of this camp site as 15,600 feet. The highest mountain in this locality would have been 20,000 feet, but as the lowest topography of this area was so highly elevated, the highest points, which were in fact the high roofs of the world, looked quite insignificant. Lal Bahadur prepared a very quick lunch and after that we split into two parties. Bob and Lal Bahadur went to one section in a western valley. I'm sure that he was more likely to be looking for a new species of bird than anything else. John and I climbed by ourselves towards the south-eastern mountains.

After a certain height of climbing, the track became comparatively steeper. At about 17,500 feet the meadows and grass lands were completely replaced by uniform, freshly broken stones and there was not one patch of vegetation. It was very difficult to climb straight up to the ridge. Our breathing was laboured and every step made us puff badly. We climbed up the side contours gradually, but whenever we put out feet onto the stone-filled areas, the rocks slid down several inches. I experienced fully the effect of altitude in climbing. The low altitude

mountains, whose gradient we had crossed so fast before, were a different story to these high altitude mountains. We weren't disheartened and after every few steps of climbing, we stopped and breathed deeply, looking around hopefully for the nayan with our binoculars. During three hours of energetic climbing in these rock filled mountains, our track twisted and spiralled across the heads of six or seven valleys. From every head of the valley we looked down very carefully to see if the nayan weren't magically hidden in the camouflaging rocks.

Finally we reached the main ridge of the mountain system, dominating the whole Ghyamana area. The altimeter recorded 19,000 feet. I felt expansive and greatly satisfied to have gained such height and I knew we had laboured very hard and climbed very quickly to do almost 3,000 feet in three hours at such a hostile altitude. The result gained from such hard labour is always sweet, even if it begins sour. I felt some tension in the nerves of my temples and I realized I had a headache. I never believed that my headache was due to mountain sickness or high altitude, as I had been walking in high altitudes for almost a month, so how could this be? Without remarking on my headache, I pushed along the high ridges with John. I didn't want to say any thing to John which might imply a weakness and I'm sure that in the same situation John wouldn't have said anything to me. How foolish is our pride. !

The gradient of the ridge followed in waves. At the eastern section, the ridge was completely blocked by a huge mass of rock almost three hundred to four hundred feet tall. Beneath the rock was a small natural water-pool, almost dried up except in the middle where water from soil condensation was stagnating. Before we approached the pool we sat in one place and looked around us from every angle, searching for any animal life before we drove them off. Everything was completely motionless and

a total tranquility enveloped this serene land. There were no bird calls, no chirping of insects and no sound of falling leaves. The only presence of life we could hear was our breathing. When our hopes of seeing wild-life vanished, we walked slowly to the pool and carefully examined the ground to see if there were any pug marks, but how can a land full of rocks conceive any paw-prints ? The periphery of the dried-up pool had dried prints made by blue sheep and not by nayan. We searched for a long time but couldn't find any prints of the nayan. There were lots of dried droppings, some of which were fairly large but on this ground alone it was hard to confirm that they belonged to the nayan.

This was a superb area giving a perfect picture of the habitat of mountain sheep and snow leopard. Whenever I looked around for the nayan, I thought of how lucky Marco Polo was to sight this animal and name it after him. However I couldn't believe how a man could have travelled so far in those times.

We were still desperately looking for a sign of nayan as we had a big hope of seeing this sheep somewhere here. We walked all around the base of the huge rock. There were a few caves near to which we found a lot of *Rhododendron novalis* with a few violet flowers budding out from clusters of very small leaves. We were highly disappointed by the non appearance of the nayan as our hopes had by now reached a crescendo.

My headache grew worse and my eyeballs felt very heavy so I kept pushing my thumb and index finger on my eyes to find relief. The nerves at my temples were strained with tension and when I felt them with my finger tips, I found they were palpitating violently. My mind now hesitantly took this as a result of altitude sickness. The more I thought about this, the more panicky I became. Gradually I sensed traces of hallucinations. I felt as if my tongue were swollen to several inches

thickness, my head was becoming heavier and heavier with its increasing size, my fingers were growing quickly like little monsters. The hallucination was terrifying, especially the feeling of the swollen tongue choking my throat as it created a psychological inability to breathe. I touched my tongue with my finger and was fighting with myself against this psychosomatic feeling reassuring myself that everything was perfectly normal. I didn't mention a single word of my feelings to John Blower. I didn't know how he felt, but he was dead silent and definitely not as he usually was. The clouds in the sky became thicker and darker and were blowing by, not very high up from us. Some wisps of cloud came as gusts making our whole world icy cold. After some time, a drizzle began, with a little crystal like hail. Making an excuse to go down to our camp, I told John without expressing my agony, that as I had no hope of seeing the nayan, I was going down and would meet him back at the camp. I floundered my way down without following any trail. It is most wonderful to come down to lower altitudes, whether a person is suffering mildly or acutely from lack of oxygen. I was greatly relieved coming down, not only psychologically, but also physically. Arriving at camp, I took two aspirins and swallowed them with some scalding tea. After changing my wet clothes, I collapsed in the tent and snuggled down inside my warm sleeping bag. I was waiting for the aspirin to take effect and relieve the uncomfortable altitude hangover. I found no hallucinations of swelling and heaviness. My breathing became perfectly normal again; I only had some slight tension and headache. When I blew my nose I noticed blood and was greatly relieved, as I realised my descent from the ridge was most timely. After forty five minute, John came down to the camp, dragging his feet, his completely wet dark khaki poncho covering him from head to knees. John's tall figure with his wide poncho made his body look like that of a huge ill proportioned scare-crow on thin, bare, muscular legs. I didn't ask him how he felt, but I'm

sure he was not looking healthier. He sat on a trunk in the kitchen and said that although he hadn't seen any sign of the nayan, he believed there were definitely some ruminants living in this area. I agreed totally with him.



CHAPTER NINE

THE DOMAIN OF CHARKA BHOT

“There are no words that can tell of the hidden spirit of the wilderness, that can reveal its mystery, its melancholy and its charm. There is delight in the hardy life of the open....the silent places....the wide wastes of the earth, unworn of man and changed only by the slow change of the ages through time everlasting”.

Theodore Roosevelt

Nima, Angmo and the Gurung boy collected a lot of dry lonicera and caragana bushes. All the porters were completely exhausted and looked very sick. The two Sarkis had a bad time as there was no shelter and they were not welcomed in the protection of the other porter's tarpaulin. I gave them my thin space blanket to shelter them from the rain. It didn't help in heavy rain, but it was useful against a drizzle. All day and night was overcast with an occasional drizzle which made it quite cold, but the porters were lucky not to be drenched by thunderous rain, as the weather looked it might pour.

The night passed without event and when I woke up, I had no trace of headache. A breakfast of crispy corn flakes made with powdered milk with my favourite fried bacon and sausages brought the morning energy. We started off full of good food and zeal. The porters were not very happy about the addition of weight loaded by the departure of the two Tarap porters. The speed of our caravan was slowed down like yesterday. Today

we planned to go to the Solung side about six miles beyond Charka Bhot.

Charka Bhot was an interesting place. In Nepali "Bhot" means a dry arid land behind the Himalayas where only people of Tibetan origin live and where communication and access is always supposed to be difficult. There are a few places beyond the Himalayan region in the country which we call Bhot like Shiar Bhot, Larkya Bhot, Manang Bhot, Mustang Bhot and Charkya Bhot is also one of them. We had no intention of staying in this village. Many people on the trail had said to us that Charka was completely inhabited by Khampas, an aggressive tribe of Tibetan refugees. To reach Charka Bhot we had to cross Mahala-bhanjyarg, a pass at 16,400 feet. The climb was quite easy and the meadows were mostly covered by *Rhododendron novalis*. At the top of the pass there was a "mane" wall with many stone tablets carved with the prayer "O mane padme hum" and on the top of these the villagers had placed the horns of wild yak *Paephagus grunniens*. That was very old and the majestic look of the horns could be visualised easily. It was one and half times bigger than any horn of domestic yak. There were no people to ask where this horn had been collected from, but Nima said this was the same horn of the last wild ruminant of this area.

From the pass we descended about 2,000 feet and reached the village of Charka Bhot. It was quite a big village of about fifty to sixty houses, built compactly together with two or three storeys. All the houses were made of crude massive stones piled one on top of the other. The houses were nestled closely together, providing support for each other. The whole village was perched on a high hillock on the bank of Barbung Khola. From some of the houses we could hear the barking of Tibetan mastiffs. All the paths were paved with loose stones and were terribly

dirty. I passed the village very quickly. Reaching the other side of the village, I waited for all the porters for almost an hour. Lal Bahadur came back with a big lump of molasses, for which he paid five rupees. We were happy again to be able to have sweet tea. The porters were very busy buying rations from the villagers, and I went back to hurry them up. The people here were quite reserved and not very keen on outsiders. They looked shy and gentle and I was surprised to have heard from the other villager that they were fierce. I talked with some of them in Nepali but they didn't understand at all. Here I saw comparatively more children than in other villages. Persuading all the porters to hasten, I came down to the river bank.

We left Charka in the afternoon, crossed a wooden bridge followed the upper basin of the Barbung Khola. On the way we saw a few temporary settlements and tents on the down-hill side of the open land. Most of the tents were circular and were tied down with yak hair ropes. It looked as if a number of families used that settlement. Around the tents, horses, yaks and domestic goats and sheep were grazing together. At first I thought this was the temporary settlement of Dolpo's nomads. But I couldn't see any stone enclosures and generally these nomads didn't use horses. I was quite confused, because if they had been nomads, they wouldn't settled near a village; they would have preferred to have gone higher up. I asked Nima who they must be, and he replied that they were Tibetan Khampas, who always lived in this way. He said that although it looked unimpressive from the outside, from inside it was highly decorated with woollen carpets and wall hangings. They didn't like living with Dolpo's Bhotias and Magars, as they considered themselves a superior class of people.

I envied their open style of living as it was far more aesthetic than the dark, smoky, cave-like houses. In the open ground

they had enough space for their cattle to graze and their horses to gallop. Their tents could stand for a long period, as the area never had the problem of rain and storms. What would happen in the winter, I wondered, and how could the tents withstand heavy snow falls? Nima told me that in winter the snow only filled the high passes and in the valleys from Shey to Charka (and Dolpo's other arid valleys) not much snow fell. If snow happened to fall, it melted quickly. It was hard to believe his information at first. How could the snow melt in such intense winter cold? I speculated that the snow might be molten by the scorching sun rays coming from the typically clear sky. On the other hand, the land and atmosphere was so dry and arid that the moisture in the snow would be partly absorbed by the soil and partly evaporated in the day air. The dryness of Dolpo, even in winter and during monsoons, might also be due to the fact that the annual precipitation is far less than the amount of moisture removed in the air. Hence, being a zone of intense cold, it is free from a permanent layer of snow.

After walking about three miles beyond Charka we arrived in an area called Julung. We decided to camp on the meeting of the Manthey and Thazang Kholas. Both of these rivers were tributaries of the Barbung Khola. The altitude of our camp was 14,200 feet. Now we were very near to the eastern boundary of the Dolpo region which we would reach within a couple of days. I was feeling rather homesick, especially when I knew that we would soon be finishing our marathon trek. The nights were becoming longer and I was longing to reach Jomosom and Pokhara as soon as possible.

Early next morning, I was disturbed by two locals who unzipped the lower portion of my tent and peeped inside, lowering their heads into the bottom open flap. When I opened my eyes and saw their strange faces gazing inquisitively at me, I was

temporarily scared and surprised and became angry with them. I yelled at them to wait for me outside the tent. When I was fully awake, I opened the tent and tied the flap back at each side. I settled myself comfortably in my sleeping bag and asked the villagers to come to me. There were two of them, both very dirty and smelling so badly that inhaling was difficult. They were grinning constantly and both of them spoke in communicable Nepali. I didn't know how they could have found out we were interested in wild animals, so I was surprised when they took out some strange horns carefully wrapped in dirty rags. First they showed me a pair of two inch circular pointed bones and said they belonged to the "kyang" *Equus hemionus* or wild ass. I laughed, thinking that they were the horns of wild ass. When I showed no interest in them, they showed me another strange horn of about six inches which they claimed was the third horn of the yak. I was little exasperated with their unlikely tales, They were, I supposed, the abnormal horns of sheep and goats. They swore in the name of god a dozen times that they were not lying, but nothing could make me buy any of their "rare" horns. The second man took out a pair of black spiralling horns curving forwards at the tip portion. These were genuine horns from the Tibetan gazelle, *Procapra picticoudata*, the 'dhowa.' This man said that about a year ago his friend had shot this gazelle in Babesa (Bowa), one day north of Charka. There was an unusual coincidence between this and the old man's story. This man's description of the shape and size of the dhowa and its habitat tallied very much with the old man's description. After this, I was fully confident that this region, especially west of Mustang and east of Dolpo, would be a good one to search for Dolpo's vanishing animals. He wanted fifteen rupees for the pair of gazelle horns, but I bargained and had horns to my name for five rupees. I later deeply regretted not buying those horns about which they related strange stories. It could have satisfied the curiosity I later developed about their story.

We left the camp at about half past seven. As we were heading eastwards, the strong rays of the sun just risen from the mountain hit directly on our faces. The low temperature of the night soared suddenly as the sun showed its early morning smile. There was no breeze. First I took off my balaclava cap and tied it around the handle of my umbrella. I took off my jerkin and tied the sleeves around my waist letting it hang down my back. The heat still tortured us. I undid my buttons and opened my shirt front. I was quite ahead on the trail when all of a sudden I heard the galloping of a horse behind me, accompanied by ringing bells. I looked back and saw a tall man, well-dressed, riding a horse and advancing along the same trail that we were on. I saw Bob about fifty yards this side, taking a photograph of the horse-man. I was little nervous about the man's reaction to having his photo taken, I saw him slow down his horse next to Bob and I ran over there before he could do anything to him. I noticed that Bob was little nervous also. Bob greeted him in Nepali but the man didn't understand at all and grinned slightly. He was very tall with high cheekbones and rather big eyes, in fact he looked rather ferocious. His Tibetan cap, embroidered with gold, was round and pointed with a flat circular top and lappets at the base. His heavy robe was made from chocolate-brown English wool. His shoes were leather knee-high boots. His fancy costume reminded me of Genghis Khan minus moustache and beard. I could see his big strong hands gripping the reins of the horse which was decorated with a very beautiful woollen saddle-carpet. When I came near to him I saw a sudden change in the personality of the strong looking horseman. He didn't study me closely and he felt uneasy on confrontation. His manner was unnerving. He kicked the horse's belly a couple of times with his powerful legs. The horse trotted forward a few steps and then took off with the speed of the wind. Both Bob and I watched him galloping off. Within a few minutes the horseman disappeared and the sound of galloping became fainter

and lost in the valley. A cloud of dust still rose along the winding track around the mountains.

I couldn't understand why the Tibetan man didn't like my company. I had clearly seen the sudden change in his personality. I was walking very slowly with Bob, discussing and pondering on this man's attitude. Nima had also noticed this man galloping from behind and had already heard of him. He was a renowned Khampa of whom many people in Chakra were afraid. A couple of years ago a military colonel with a number of his aides travelled to this area and took this man and his father into custody, as they heard they had threatened the villagers. Since then they were afraid of any government official from Kathmandu. Nima had heard that now they had become peaceful and no longer bothered the villagers. When Nima told me this, I realized he must have taken me for a government officer and decided to make a hasty exit.

At about eleven o'clock we reached the bank of the main upstream Barbung Khola. Most of the mountain torrents we crossed on the way joined up with this river system. The river was quite wide and full of crystal clear water. There was no bridge and the water level was quite deep. At the crossing, the river channel widened. We took off our shoes and trousers leaving on only our underwear. The current was high so first the Gurung boy crossed the river holding a nylon rope and stretched this across the river onto the other side. With the help of the rope we crossed the river one by one. The water was freezing to walk in for such a long distance. Some of the porters weren't wearing any underwear and their vital parts were just covered by their long shirts front and back. When they dipped their feet in the water they gasped with the sudden cold. We asked them to steady their loads carefully, as we didn't want them to slip in the river and ruin everything, especially our films and

note books which were our "third eyes" on this trip. When the porters crossed the river, they kept one hand on the rope and one hand on the head strap. As they proceeded to the middle of the river, the level rose and the water came higher and higher up. Each time we could see the porters gasping. Finally they were so far immersed in the water that they had to pull up their shirts to above waist level. The water was so clear that we could see all their bodies naked down from the waist and their penises and balls were shrinking incredibly to a lump of wrinkles. The sight of their shrinking organs refracted on the surface of the water and caused those who had already crossed to rock with laughter. Lal Bahadur stayed back to hold the rope on the other side. One by one the porters crossed. Finally Angmo was left behind. Now everybody was anxiously waiting to see how Angmo would cross the river. She was still reluctant to cross. Now there was nobody whom Angmo could ask to go first except Lal Bahadur. At last, with great reluctance, she forced herself to step into the water. She held her long dress high up to tops of her knees. Everybody's eyes were glued onto her shapely legs. No one was shy about where he was looking. As the level of the water rose she pulled her dress higher and higher, revealing her shapely thighs, but to the disappointment of all the anxiously hovering eyes when the water reached a critical level she dropped her dress.

Putting back on our socks and shoes, we moved further on. The river scene was highly entertaining for everyone and the porters were still chuckling. The track went along another tributary of the Barbung Khola called Thajung Khola. All the path was covered with honeysuckles. The trail I was following divided in front of me, one path went up to the mountains and the other to the river bed of Thajung Khola. I was a little confused where to go. I knew that both trails led to the other side of the valley. I looked at the trail along the river bed which was

full of boulders (some half submerged in the water) that could be use as stepping stones. All my friends and porters were behind. Without waiting for them I decided to follow the trail along the river bed. Sometimes it was so 'disheartening' to gain and lose height, but by following this short cut I was economising on energy and effort. After walking for a few minutes in the river I found it narrowed and channeled into a deep gorge. The trail which was supposed to go along the bank of this river was washed away, so I had to traverse it through the middle of river bed. On either side the walls of the gorge were loosely composed of rock and soil. It was dangerous, for at any time the rocks could fall down. I passed this gorge as fast as I could. I felt I was trapped in a big dead-lock as the gorge was about half a mile long and now I couldn't retrace my steps but had to continue somehow. It took me between thirty and forty minutes without wasting a single minute. However, I did well with my fantastic acrobatic feet and precise hopping. Finally at the end of the gorge a golden valley appeared before me. My heart which had narrowly shrunk in the narrow gorge, expanded with my deep breathing at the opening of the canyon. I lay down flat, I looked all round and my eyes stuck on the mountain to where I noticed a line of "miniature" men walking slowly downward. I looked through my binocular and saw Bob with his umbrella hooked down the back of his collar, as usual leading and at the tail, Angmo was followed by the Gurung boy. I waited confidently. The party arrived one hour later. The weather worsened later in the day so we decided to camp with here. In this valley called Solung, where Thajung Khola meets another tributary called Mulung Khola. This was a deserted valley with no houses or human habitations.

In the morning I heard Nima's voice calling softly outside my tent. Without opening it I asked what he wanted. Nima said hesitantly that he was leaving this morning. I opened the tent

and saw Nima and Angmo sitting on their haunches. Both of them were smiling, but they were not very happy to leave us. I said, "I thought you were going back from Jomosom ?" They didn't want to cross the Sandak Pass and then come down to Jomosom. Here they could easily go to their home via Mukat Gaon. I didn't force them to come along with us as their departure from this point was most convenient for them. I was a little concerned how the remaining porters could manage to adjust their additional loads, since they already had those of two other porters. I asked Angmo if she also didn't want to come with us. She did not utter a word. Smiling and very shy, she dug her nails into the ground.

I asked Lal Bahadur and the other porters if they could adjust the loads. Nobody said anything except Lal Bahadur who stated that it would be quite difficult. It was almost impossible to find porters in these desert lands, but I didn't want to drag poor Angmo and Nima against their wish and then send them back just by themselves. I worked out their wages and John paid them and gave them a "baksis" of twenty-five rupees each. Both of them were quite satisfied with our generosity.

Before I sent them Off I came out from the tent and checked the basket of each individual porter. Everybody was carrying a number of empty tin cans and bottles and some were carrying an excess of food stock. I took out all the cans and bottles, promising them that in Pokhara we would give them the rest of our cans and bottles. I divided those empty cans between Angmo and Nima. The distribution worked out very well, but still they had a little excess weight. I requested the porters to sell their foodstuffs to Angmo and Nima, since we would reach Jomsom in two or three days time. I assured them that if they couldn't get food on the way, we would feed them from our stock.

Everything was finalised and we had arrived at a good mutual decision. The porters felt equally sad to leave their companions. The Gurung boy felt quite lost. He smiled childishly. Sometimes he looked pathetically at his departing girl friend, but Angmo didn't look at him, although she felt pain at leaving her beloved friend. Perhaps she didn't have the courage to look at him. I gave them my shirt, sweater, the leather shoes I bought in Dhorpatan, and a few other unnecessary items. This time they couldn't smile as they were very touched by our affection. Angmo's tiny blinking eyes were looking in a vacuum and she could no longer even force a smile. They tied up their packs with the Gurung boy helping Angmo. I felt very bad about the separation of Angmo and this boy. I would have liked to ask him why he didn't go off with his beloved and live with her.

I asked Lal Bahadur to give them some tea and breakfast, but the poor people had their hearts full of compassion and couldn't even take a drop of tea. They were choked up and tea and breakfast was like a punishment for them, while in normal times it would have been a big luxury. Both of them stood up and full of respect Nima bowed down, his hands together in the gesture of "Namaste" to everybody. When he came to me, he knelt on the ground and bowed almost to my knees. I was so touched by Nima's deep respect and affection that my eyes were filled with tears and my chest felt tight. I held him in both hands and made him stand, patting his shoulders, unable to say anything.

They both left the camp. We all watched them. Every few steps Nima looked back, but Angmo never turned her head. Although I couldn't see her face, I could imagine she must be silently crying. I watched them as long as possible. They disappeared and reappeared on the winding spurs of the valley and finally our companions, who had accompanied us and shared our joys and sorrows, who had carried our loads on their heads

and who had stolen our love, were lost in the land of Dolpo forever. Now we didn't know if we would ever meet again.

We packed up our loads and left the camp an hour after Angmo and Nima's departures. Now we were heading towards Sandak pass, the last major pass to cross in Dolpo. We were not discouraged however, as we had already crossed dozens like this, but I could imagine that if we had begun our trek from the Kali Gandaki this pass would have been a big challenge. We climbed slowly along the Mulung Khola. We passed many valleys and after for half an hour along the other side of the river, we saw an open valley coming from Mukat. This was the route which Nima and Angmo must have taken. I gazed at that opening and thought of how Nima and Angmo would have to walk alone for days and nights in such deserted lands.

As we went higher and higher, the head of the Mulung Khola disappeared into the wide chest of the Sandak Pass. This pass was flanked by snow-capped mountains on either side. It was quite wide and very long, almost one and a half miles. As far as I could recall, it was the longest and widest high altitude pass I had ever seen. The altitude scale read 17,000 feet. From this magnificent pass the landscape was opulent to behold. It was like watching the widest screen cinematography of one of the most beautiful horizons of the world. When I looked back, the line of porters coming behind me gave the impression of a file of ants moving very slowly. The comparison between our porter and this gigantic pass was awe inspiring.

Now we arrived at the highest point of this pass, the last major pass of our long and arduous trek. We were so happy to be at the final phase of our energetic trek. John celebrated this pass with three colourful shots from his flare gun. With each shot, a highly luminiscent bullet flew up in the sky and dropped spectacularly, being extinguished in the middle of the drop. All

the porters were surprised and walked quickly up to the pass to see what it was. We decided to break for lunch to celebrate. John said in his gruff voice, "I'll celebrate in my way". He opened a box and took out a tin of fruit cake. The label was completely torn off the tin as it had been carried for a long time, hitting against other tins. John knew how to prepare it. Lal Bahadur heated water in a pot by burning dry grass and John put the can in boiling water for ten minutes. Bob and I watched John cook. He took the can out from the boiling water with his bare hands and opened it up. There the dark rich fruit cake appeared like magic emitting a most delicious delicacy. It was full of raisins, mixed dried fruits, nuts and spices and was indeed delicious. The celebration with this christmas cake gave us a feeling of having accomplished our aim. The porters were also celebrating with their best food which was helped along with some chicken cubes that we gave them.

After lunch we packed and sent the porters on ahead of us. John, Bob and I were still taking our last photographs of these spectacular rolling mountains. Now we were leaving fascinating Dolpo behind and after some time we would be in a different zone of fauna and flora. This pass was not only a bisecting boundary line between the administrative region of Mustang and Dolpo, but more precisely, it was an important ridge line between the two important river systems of Nepal—the Kali Gandaki and the Karnali. All the innumerable Kholas, rivulets, springs, rivers and every drop of rain water that we had come across in the last month made up the tributaries of the Karnali river. From now on, the watershed of the major Kali Gandaki would begin. For a while I stood quietly looking at either side of the pass. I was standing on one of the most vital points of Nepal.

This pass was also interesting as it led soon to the crags and narrow passes in the Great Himalayan Barrier. From now

onwards there would be no more Arctic desert; the flower-dotted meadows would disappear and we would find mountains with steep slopes and permanent snow caps—the Himalayas. After we crossed the pass, the gradients of the topography fell into a sharp steep trail. As our track proceeded forwards, the gentle slope petered out into rock-filled steep mountain slopes.

Now the trail entered the most miraculous rocky mountains. We were almost confined within four walls of rocky crags. Each wall of the mountains towered a couple of thousand feet high. The trail along which we were passing followed somewhere in the middle of the ledges of the rocky cliffs. Sometimes we looked at the top of the cliff which was perched perpendicularly on the narrow gorge. Sometimes we looked down into the dizzy chasm, from where we could hear water flowing. Although we couldn't see the bottom, the river bed which began on the other side of the breast of the Sandak Pass dropped very steeply.

The geological formation of these mountains within narrow crags was quite new to me, but it reminded me of the impressionist pictures of the mountains in Tibetan scrolls. The Tibetan art of painting mountains is always very symmetrical and cubical. I was always confused why the mountains were painted so unnaturally. Now looking at these strange formations of crystalline mountain, one could easily guess the lively impression of their painting. The rock formation was purely crystalline. The stratification of the rocks was vertical and the front, with no joint, was exposed face-wise as if it had been glued around with another rock behind. I could see the numerous layers of massive rocks joined onto each other vertically, like the leaves of a book. It looked subject to rock-fall and I wondered if the exterior rocks could separate from the parent rock and block the narrow gorge. Who knows, that might have happened here already and who would notice in this deserted land ?

After descending another 4,000 feet of steep trail we came across a most spectacular bridge joining the deep narrow gorge with a sheer drop of about 500 feet. It was made of two wooden poles of huge pine trees over which were placed slates of rock to make walking easy. I crossed the bridge in one go, without looking on either side. From the bank on the other side I walked very cautiously to the edge, thrusting my chest forward and lengthening my neck as much as possible and peered down into the depths. The height was so dizzy that I quickly stepped back. I walked down to a safe point from where I could see the whole landscape of the deep gorge abridged meticulously. I wondered how the people must have made this bridge in such an inaccessible area, without any mechanical help carrying huge logs and fixing them at such a dangerous point ?

After about four kilometers we arrived at the river bed down in the valley. This place was called Josa. We made our camp, but there was no soil to hold our tents. The pegs wouldn't fix into the pebbles. I examined many different places for ground-holding capacity and finally I pitched the tent holding it down with big rocks at all the places with tie ropes. We were still surrounded within the huge rock walls and at the place where we camped we felt as if we were confined in a big natural well.

Next morning when we got up it was raining, but since we were approaching Jomosom, we didn't wait for the rain to stop. We packed the wet tents and left the site as soon as possible. By noontime we arrived at the fringe of the upper Kali Gandaki zone. The valley opened and we were again in the inhabited world. Yak were grazing with Nepali speaking herdsmen. When they saw us, the children ran up to us asking for money and chocolates and the adults came asking many questions about us, from where we had come and who we were. After our long seclusion and isolation, we were happy to talk with these villagers

for a short while, but very soon their excess curiosity bored us. In order not to be disturbed by them, we camped in some grassy meadows at a little distance from this village which was called Phala. That night we could see Phala with its few flickering oil lamps and lanterns.

Next morning, without going to Phala village, we walked along the contour lines to the semi-desert mountains. In the village the Buddhist religion sparkled, shown by the number of "chortens" and "manes". The altitude we scaled here was 12,400 feet. By eleven o'clock in the morning we reached the head of Jomosom valley, from where the trail followed sharply down to Kagabeni village. The village of Kagabeni is in the bed of a valley shortly beyond the point where the track to Muktinath climbs out of the Kali Gandaki valley. Muktinath is one of the sacred lands for Hindus. It is about ten miles north-east from this point.

Without stopping in Kagabeni, I rushed down to Jomosom, the land that I had been impatiently waiting for. I was quite familiar with this region and had travelled here about two years before. I remembered Jomosom very well as the windy land where all day winds swept away every trace of humidity. Coming down from Kagabeni to Jomosom, the wide Kali Gandaki river with its partially dried-up river bed unmistakably appeared. Following the western bank, I made myself ready to face the sand-filled blasts of wind from the Kali Gandaki gorge. As I guessed, powerful gusts of wind welcomed me to Jomosom. I was acquainted with most of the houses and lanes. I came to the check-post that is in a small house situated on the south bank of a small rivulet of the Kali Gandaki. I waited for John and Bob to come.

I quite enjoyed talking in perfect Nepali again with the check post people and telegraph office people in front of the check

post and I was keen to know from them what was happening in our world. After concluding the formal report at the check-post, we arrived at Jomosom airfield where we rested and waited for our porters. We all went to the Tibetan restaurant. I found a big change from my last trip in a shop with a new large stock of merchandise. About two years ago they sold tea, biscuits and some home-made noodle soups, but now we saw racks of canned beer, all kinds of biscuits and canned food. We were quite hungry and now we didn't have to wait for Lal Bahadur to come and prepare the meal. The value of money had returned for us and my hands were itching to spend it. I ordered three full bowls of Tibetan noodles. Before they were ready we opened two cans of beer and satisfied our thirsts. It was a real luxury to sit on a wooden bench in a warm room in this dry, windy valley, sip beer and enjoy the steaming noodles.

Our porters arrived as we finished our lunch. We told them we would camp near the village of Marfa. They all agreed on this and promised to come down as soon as possible, since they didn't want to stay in such a windy place. We arrived in the flat land of Marfa. The aridity and barrenness of Jomosom was replaced here by splashes of green cultivation. All the porters arrived at the site much sooner than we expected; perhaps they were also very irritated by the wind. Every member of our party was extremely happy today and looked quite relieved that we were close to our home land. Still though, there were a few more days of mountain walking, but none of us really seemed to consider this next part as a trek at all. I told John, Bob and all the porters that I would leave the camp tomorrow as soon as possible for Pokhara. There I had to finish some of my business and at the same time I could book the flights from Pokhara to Kathmandu. That way none of us would have to be stuck in Pokhara in the heat and rain. After working out everybody's wages so that John could pay the porters, I asked Lal Bahadur to cook a grand meal of fresh chicken curry and gave

everybody a farewell dinner. Lal Bahadur was very happy; his joy was directly proportional to the width of his smile and the sparkling of his teeth. The main reason at that moment for his happiness was, I am sure, to hear of fresh chicken curry.

I packed some necessities in my back pack. I decided to leave everything and let the porters carry them along with the party. I knew this track very well and it was one of my favourite places. I loved to stay in the village houses and eat dal bhat with “shikar” (dried meat curry) in way-side “bhattis” (inns). I called all the porters one by one and gave them whatever I could as a souvenir. I gave the Sarki porters a few rupees and the Tamang porters my socks, umbrella, shirts and undershirts. To the Gurung boy I gave my sweater. The poor boy had lost all his smiles since his sweetheart Angmo had left. Even when he forced a smile, his mouth stretched wide, but his forehead was still frowning. I asked him if he would go back to Tarap and see his girl friend. I knew it was impossible for him to go there again and even if he went, there might be many taboos against their union. Tomorrow in the early morning I would leave all these people before they woke up, go down to Pokhara and from there go back to Kathmandu. I would never meet them again, but my vivid memories of them would always flash in my mind, the moment I thought of Dolpo.



CHAPTER TEN

KALI GANDAKI

“Nowhere in Nepal have I seen so abrupt a change of climate and vegetation telescoped into a short distance as in the valley of Kali Gandaki where in the space of a day’s march one can descend from the sharp dry sunshine and wind-blown flora to the steamy humidity and subtropical flora.”

Adam Stainton

When I woke up, the world was still sleeping. It was five o’clock, but Marfa valley was much darker than it should be. To wake myself up properly, I rubbed my eyes many times and then washed my face with icy-cold water. John, Bob and all the porters were still dreaming. I woke Lal Bahadur who very hesitantly opened one eye. I said good-bye to him and asked him to meet me in Pokhara. I slowly walked away from the camp-site with the lightest possible back pack.

The village of Marfa appeared out of the dreamy mist and the glow of morning invaded every corner of the valley, chasing away all the darkness, even though the golden rays of the sun hadn’t pierced into the valley. The surroundings were still peaceful. The ghastly wind hadn’t yet started blowing from the south and roosters were calling out frequently, “Get up soon, get up soon !” The beautiful people of Marfa, who are “thakalis” by ethnic group and after whom the name “Thak Khola” was given to the Kali Gandaki, were no doubt finding it difficult to get out of their warm beds.

The Thakalis were one of the major ethnic groups of Nepal, composed of many different sub-classes of "Chan." By their cultural traditions and by their activity in business, they dominate all of Thak Khola, from Jomosom, the north head, down to Tatopani, the south end. Their supremacy continues to be felt beyond the north and south region as far as Pokhara and Bhairawa. This thirty mile belt is richly inhabited by clean and tidy Thak villages. Their sophistication, neatness and hospitality is acknowledged all over the country. Their women are more liberated and smarter in business than those of other ethnic groups. Hence, sometime more boisterous young people including many of the Gorkha soldiers returning from Hong-kong, Malaya and India, misunderstood their open, friendly and liberal characteristics. They have a wrong impression that these beautiful Thakali girls are very easily approached. Many Gorkha soldiers who had been stationed overseas for many years spent a lot of their savings in trying to get these pretty mountain belles. In most cases the girls were smart enough to keep a platonic relationship with them. The "bhatties," an inn run by these Thakali are so popular that outside of Thak Khola region, people have been known to impersonate them, so that their "bhatties" would also be popular.

Since long ago, these Thakali people have led the trade of salt and wool from Tibet in this area. The vital importance of this region was reduced when the Tibetan trade was cut off in 1959. In the early sixties, many of the families migrated to Pokhara, Bhairawa and Kathmandu in order to maintain their standard of living. I was told on my last trip that most of the houses of the Thak Khola villages were deserted and some had even collapsed because there was nobody to care for them. Now, since tourism has entered Nepal, Thak Khola and Kali Gandaki have become attractive spots on the tourist itinerary. The villages have once again become bustling and colourful.

The Kali Gandaki river, which starts from upper Mustang and flows south to the lowland Tarai, where it meets the great Narayani, traverses many regions from semi-desert to sub-tropical monsoon forest. Biogeographically, the entire river valley is most interesting. The incredible change in vegetation encountered in a day's trek in the valley is astounding. Last time when I visited this area, I climbed from south to north. The sub-tropical jungle was replaced by conifers and later by bushy xerophytic scrubs, finally to peter out into treeless country. Now, the desert was becoming greener with the fall of altitude. The scanty growth of *Lonicera*, *Caragana* and *Ephedra* became taller and were mixed with pine forests. Leaves were becoming broader with broad-leaf species of maple, *Aesculus* and *Rhododendron*. The interesting role of the Kali Gandaki was not limited to a demonstration of a vegetational spectrum from north to south. The most spectacular aspects of this big river emerged in the centre of the country where it made two halves, the east and west zones.

It used to be assumed that the Arun river in the east of Nepal was the dividing line of the whole Himalayan range. Now the Kali Gandaki is considered as the breaking point and this is markedly exemplified by the bird-life. The eastern birds include the brown parrot hill, golden breasted tit babbler, rufus bellied snipe babbler and the western birds that reached Dhaulagiri (and apparently no further east) are the black tit, spot wing black tit, white throated tit, missel thrush, white cheeked nut-hatch, (Bob Fleming-1971). There are other differences apart from bird-life. Climatically western Nepal is much drier than eastern Nepal. Therefore, the western Himalayan elements in the vegetational distribution are markedly different from the eastern Himalayan elements. For example, some of the endemic species of the western Himalayas are not found east of the Kali Gandaki. The differences of east and west floral elements are

displayed in numerous species of shrubs and herbs. Within the north-south belt of the Kali Gandaki, many vegetational types can be found due to micro-climatic effects. The leading ones observed here are the mountain aspects, wind, rain, geological formation and altitude. The effect of wind blowing from south to north along the valley is noteworthy. It sweeps away most of the clouds and moisture from the centre of the valley, which reduces the rainfall, but the sides of the valley are buffeted with clouds and mist. This is the result of strong winds clearing a path through the middle of the valley and causing the clouds to bank up on either side. Hence the rainfall on the sides of the valley is much heavier than that in the middle.

This morning the strong winds hadn't started blowing and I could see thick blankets of heavy mist still covering the whole wide river bed of Thak Khola. All the trail I was following down was visible for a certain distance and after that a dreamland awaited me. As I pushed forward, the curtain of the dream opened to me. Passing through forests of black juniperus *Abies spectabiles* and blue pine *Pinus exelsa*, I arrived at Tukche, the main headquarter of Thakalis and the "capital" of Thak Khola. The shops and "bhattis" had not yet opened, but the ladies of some of the houses had already woken up and were busying themselves with their morning cleaning. Tukche was beautifully framed in the rising morning mist. The hot beams of the sun were evaporating every bead of moisture, but the eastern bank of the Kali Gandaki was still looking chilly and damp. The Gompas and lines of well-built houses were glittering with a high degree of prosperity. My path sometimes followed the stone-paved narrow alleys and sometimes it passed through the ground floors of numerous houses like a tunnel. These houses were incomparably cleaner than the filthy and sewerage-filled narrow alleys of some of the primitive villages of the interior of Dolpo. To make sure I was following the right direction,

I frequently asked for the right path, as I didn't want to disturb any house-holder by going under his dwelling, even then, I had a good memory of how the way through Thak Khola sometimes passed under houses.

Leaving beautiful Tukche behind I pressed on along a wide mule track which passed through a series of green agricultural lands and forested areas, intercepted by numerous rivulets. I passed the interesting small villages of Kobang and Larjung. I glimpsed temples in some places, indicating I was on the threshold of a Hindu country. Then the valley of the Kali Gandaki became wider as I approached its biggest tributary, the Ghatte Khola. It was dry with a few rivulets on the sides showing that the monsoon was coming and I could imagine that very soon the Ghatte Khola would be swollen. This torrential river has caused many landslides on the banks while its delta has been widening year after year, eating into both sides of the pine-forested banks.

At about half past eleven, I arrived at Lete. My mouth felt sticky, as still I hadn't taken a drop of water and my stomach was hollow. I hunted for "bhattis", but every house looked exactly the same. The ground floor of each was spotlessly clean, covered on the floor with red mud and on the walls cupboards were filled with beautifully sparkling brass and copper pots. When I looked for the "bhatties" I was vividly imagining "dal-bhat" sprinkled with buffalo butter and tastefully prepared dried meat curry. I became hungrier and hungrier as I thought of it. Passing through the village lanes, I could hear the splattering of vegetables frying in oil from the houses and the aroma was most appetising. I had not yet found a house which I could recognize as a "bhatti" or restaurant. I had nearly passed all the houses and reached the end of Lete when I hesitantly asked a middle aged lady in a house if I could buy "dal-bhat" or if she could make some for me. She said spontaneously "Oh, yes, come in." She swept the

room which was already spotlessly clean. At the side, there was a high bench placed against the wall. It was covered with a long straw mat. I took off my dirty boots at the doorway and sat on the mat. The lady, who was also a Thakali, brought a long, loosely woven brightly coloured carpet. It wasn't of Tibetan style; I guessed it was made locally and it looked very much like the Tamang style. This lady was very talkative. She was quite pretty with a few freckles on her high cheeks. She wore a Nepali blouse which was tied with binding, one on the shoulder and one down at the high waist. But the blouse was so tight that the front border was gaping open, showing the cleavage of her large oozing breasts. She asked me to wait five minutes as the "shikar" (dried meat curry) had to be prepared, but the "dal-bhat" and "tarkari" (vegetables) were ready. I patiently decided to wait and have a good meal to satisfy my hunger. When, after a long time the food wasn't ready, I peeped inside the kitchen. She was sitting and stocking up the fire with more wood in all furnaces holes. I confirmed that she was cooking rice, dal and curry all at once. I was a little angry with her fib that the rice and dal were already prepared, but my agitation subsided as the smell of the food whispered to me that it was almost ready. At last the food arrived and I hungrily gulped it down.

In most Thakali villages, there are no specific "bhattis" or restaurants. Every house and every family serves food or tea on travellers' requests. This income goes to the ladies' purses for their pocket expenses. Very few men of the village have taken this job as their main means of support. This is just a side business for them and now a days it is starting to become a strong source of income for many families on this popular route.

The village of Lete was in the middle of the gorge. After going down a little I could see the incredibly impressive sight of

all the western flanks of Dhaulagiri. Last time I had a beautiful view, but today the magnificent views of Dhaulagiri, the sixth highest mountain of the world and of Annapurna, the massive eight thousander, were hidden inside the nebulous thick clouds. Mist domed the valley, canopied the higher level of the river bed and enveloped the mountain in the form of an arc. The shape of the mist which hung over the valley gave a picture of a huge arched gate of heaven. Ahead of us, the well marked trail laddered into rocks up and down in the hanging cliffs. The valley narrowed. The thunderous sound of the Kali Gandaki underlined the force of the cascading torrent. Whenever the two great monstrous flanks, Annapurna in the east and Dhaulagiri in the west, tried to trap this independent, snow-fed torrent, its anger roared with a high temper, making every passer-by tremble. Seeing these deep, narrow gorges, I thought the mountains had been trying to hold back the river since time immemorial, but the mighty Kali Gandaki broke the impenetrable walls, exhibiting a constant battle of strength between the mountains and the river. Here, the victory of the river was unquestionably announced. The Kali Gandaki might have taken its course before the beginning of earth movements in the Himalayan zone. The uplifting movement of the earth might have occurred so slowly that erosion proceeded as fast as, or faster than, the uplift. The river may have kept its original course and in time may have shown no relation to the geological structure developed by the earth's movement. Hence the age of the Kali Gandaki could be guessed to be older than the Himalayas.

Every trekker who passes through these deep gorges must feel very proud of traversing it, since it is said to be the deepest in the world. This Kali Gandaki flowing between the saddle of two flanks of in world's highest mountains, at an altitude of 2,000 metre makes the height of the gorge about 6,000 metre deep within an aerial distance of thirty-three kilometers.

Approaching Ghasa, the deep canyons widened and the trail further down followed along the west bank of the canyon. One of the most spectacular aspects of this section was the way in which the trail was completely chiselled into the face of the sheer rock cliff, causing the rock to overhang the whole trail. This exciting path was reasonably wide for a mule track and on the river side, a safe wall was made by piling up rocks. The height of this tunnel was designed for dwarf people; so a tall man had to bend low. Walking all the way down along the wide trail, feasting my eyes on the different colours of nature was really exciting. I never tired and continued to rush down. With no definite plan of where to spend the night, I kept walking with no fear of where to sleep, as there was a settlement after almost every mile of the trail. I was rather walking day dream I didn't notice any wild-life except for a few outstanding colourful sub-tropical birds like scarlet minivet and some magpies.

At six o'clock I arrived in Tatopani, which is situated at the lowest elevation in this Thak Khola region. Here the majority of the population split into different ethnic groups, of which the Thakalis have the smallest proportion. Many men of the families here are engaged in the army recruited outside Nepal. I arrived fairly late, with a great wish of taking a bath in hot springs, which have given the name to this town. However, I first looked for accommodation. Without any difficulties I found a good place to stay, with a most comfortable bed. I wasn't tired, but once I had taken a beautiful meal my eyes closed. I slept so quickly and deeply that not even my host's crying baby disturbed me. I woke in the morning when all the family in the house had already risen. The special tea the land-lady brought, made by pouring boiling milk over tea leaves in a filter and mixing it with Nepalese spices, refreshed me and gave me the courage to reach Pokhara that day. The land-lady was surprised at my mad courage and was puzzled when I said

that yesterday my march was from Marfa to Tatopani which most people usually took two days to do.

Now the trail separated from the Kali Gandaki, passing across a suspension bridge. I climbed about 5,000 feet to the top of Ghorepani. Heavily soaked with rain, descending steeply through thick rhododendron forest, I arrived at the small village of Thante. I was quite lucky that leeches kept well away from me, as I had rubbed the leaves of the aromatic plant, *Artemesia*, on my shoes. From Birethante, next morning, I had a hard march and was able to arrive on the outskirts of Pokhara by early afternoon.

The monsoon had already made Pokhara quite wet and from Suikhet I walked across the river and muddy irrigated banks. I was quite relieved when I stepped into Pokhara valley, but I didn't realize how big it was, and the more I walked, the further it seemed. My eagerness to reach the Divisional Forest Office bungalow and to see my friend mounted as I entered the middle section of Pokhara valley. After a long, impatient three hour's walk I reached the Divisional Forest Office. I was soaked to the skin and completely exhausted after the very long journey in the rain. I sat back in an armchair without saying a word, took off my muddy shoes and wet socks. My feet were so water sodden that they had turned blue, and the skin was very moist and wrinkled, as if they were the feet of a dead man who had been lying in water for days and nights.

I went to the bathroom with four full buckets of water. I washed several times with soap to clean every spot of dirt. I stood in front of a big mirror. I looked awful with my untidy moustache and beard. The growth of the beard was quite uneven. To get rid of this ape-like appearance I shaved completely, but to my great dismay, when I washed my face I looked worse. My scaly nose was darkly-tanned, as were my cheek-bones and forehead. My lower cheeks and chin were white. I couldn't

dare return to Kathmandu with these ugly contrasting black and white shades on my face.

Very soon the physical marks of rain, sun and wind would disappear from my face and body. But the marks made by the affection of my beautiful companions, the eternal painting of rolling Dolpo, the faith which made me sense the presence of God, the innocent animals and soaring birds, would never fade from my mind. It took fifty days to see this vast land, the land of mystery, serenity and peace. But these days had made such an impact on me that now to see it I just closed my eyes and I would return again and again. How lucky I was that I could enjoy sense and see, all the divine assets of nature !



EPILOGUE

*Away from you,
I escaped to the land of solitude.
Crossing hundreds of miles, walking up and down,
Fatigued, exhausted, but relieved and ecstatic,
Somewhere in the great barrier of the Himalayas
Beyond the inhabitable world,
I opened the door to Heaven.*

*And there abounds
Shining silver and black diamond,
With much delicate living gold
And multicoloured gems sparkle all around,
Every inch of this Heaven is carpeted green and soft
Ambrosia from the lake of turquoise enhances all with eternity.*

*All these treasures belong to
The gliding golden eagle,
The snowy king of the cats
The restless mouse hare,
And innocent wild sheep
Their abode and wealth are secure and protected.*

*I travelled to this mystic world
With the children of the mountains.
Sufficed my inner being to behold--enchantment
I saw God and talked with the angels.
So much love they have for this land;
They are reincarnated here over and over.*

*I heard the call of the wilderness in the avalanches,
The shrill song of the dipper in the cascades,
The mewling of the wild sheep and yelp of the chough
All these sounds of different vibrants
Symphonize here the hymns divine,
Which rolls along the buttress of the mountains.*

*Very soon the devil called me back
The angels disappeared
The children of the mountains returned,
The rolling paradise broke
Dark clouds closed the eternal roof of the world
I came back to you, to share the life of grief, anger and
dissatisfaction.*

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SHARDA PRAKASHAN GRIHA

Sharda Prakashan Griha has a series of books in English about Nepal.

Classification

H—History
F—Fiction

C—Children
S—Sports

Out-already

H 1—Nepal After the Revolution (Vol. I) *Kaiser Bahadur K. C.*

The last days of the Rana rule, the call of Democracy by King Tribhuvan, the return of the leaders from India and the wind of change taking place in Nepal are adequately covered in this volume. The author in his capacity as a high level civil servant gives a vivid insight account of the period from 1949 to July 1953.

F 3—The Red Temple

Mani Dixit

The story, set in Pokhara in Western Nepal, deals with the present times. It is basically a story of the Khampa rebellion, its connections with foreign organisations, hippies, drugs and associated killings. Because of its topical nature, it should be quite popular with avid readers of modern literature.

C 4—Two Towards Kantipur

Mani Dixit

This story set in a Nepal of the mid-eighteenth century. It is about two boys who live in a small village in Eastern Nepal.

Hearing the story of one of their village elders about Kantipur, the present day Kathmandu, the two boys resolve to run away from the village and go to Kantipur.

Whilst going across the jungle, they come across a tiger, and some bandits and because of the prevailing circumstances, are obliged to return back to the village. After an encounter between the villagers and the bandits, the two boys finally leave for and reach Kantipur. Further adventures befall them in and around Kantipur.

F 5—Nothing Greener

Greta Rana

Shushma, daughter of a poor alcoholic is forced into marriage as a co-wife. Life becomes unbearable and she leaves for Kathmandu.

There she develops into a mature young woman who eventually has a love affair with the son of the American employers.

Disaster strikes and she returns to her village, where she dies.

H 2—Nepal After the Revolution (Vol. II) Kaiser Bahadur K. C.

This volume covering the period from July 1953 is a continuation of the political upheavals which took place at that time. All aspects of the national upsurge are covered from the motivations of the parties concerned to the actions and counteractions issued therefrom. There are flashbacks on the ideals of King Tribhuvan who was the pivot of the revolution and who held in his firm grip the weal of the nation for generations to come. This volume ends with the events of March 1965. And It may be said that these two volume are a portrait of the peerless King who fought for the people, loved for the people and died for the people.

Kamala is barely seventeen when she is brought from her home in the Western Hills to be the bride of a Rana. Bring with her a tragic secret of her own, this novel describes her submersion into the life of the durbar against the background of the changing times. A story with a difference because Kamala is not the run of the mill feudal aristocrat. One has to see the life of the community through her eyes to realise that behind all the greed and grasping there remained a body of people who were valid and symasathetic human beings.

F 7—The Occult Seeker*J. Raj*

For John, the son of aristocratic English parents, living a comfortable life in a penthouse in London did not pose much of a problem. It was simply out of fun that John and his girl friend went to see the famous clairvoyant at Chelsea, who prophesied that soon there was going to be unrest in their life and that ultimately he would discover peace in a distant land.

Kathmandu, the ultimate Shangri-La where John reached to seek the ultimate truth and find the eternal bliss. He has a taste of the new and developing society of Kathmandu. He discovers that there are all those aspects of human life in Nepal. He has exposure to a new and weird of rituals and spiritual practices. The realisation of the Ultimate Truth becomes the final attainment.

S 8—Those Were the Days*Lt. Col. Ena Shumsher Rana**Mani Dixit*

This is an account of a lifetime of shikar in the good old days starting with April 1946. Though the setting is mainly in Nepal, there are however one or two episodes which take place

in India. There are accounts of panther, wild boar, sambar and of course tigers. A large part of the book deals with tigers, including its life and habits in the jungle. It should therefore be of interest not only to hunters of yesteryear, but also the budding naturalists.

The days of the sportsman shikari are gone—at least as far as the protected species are concerned. The trend now is to shoot with the camera. The days of the protected species and the National Parks are with us whilst the killings of those days are just a faint memory.

For further particulars

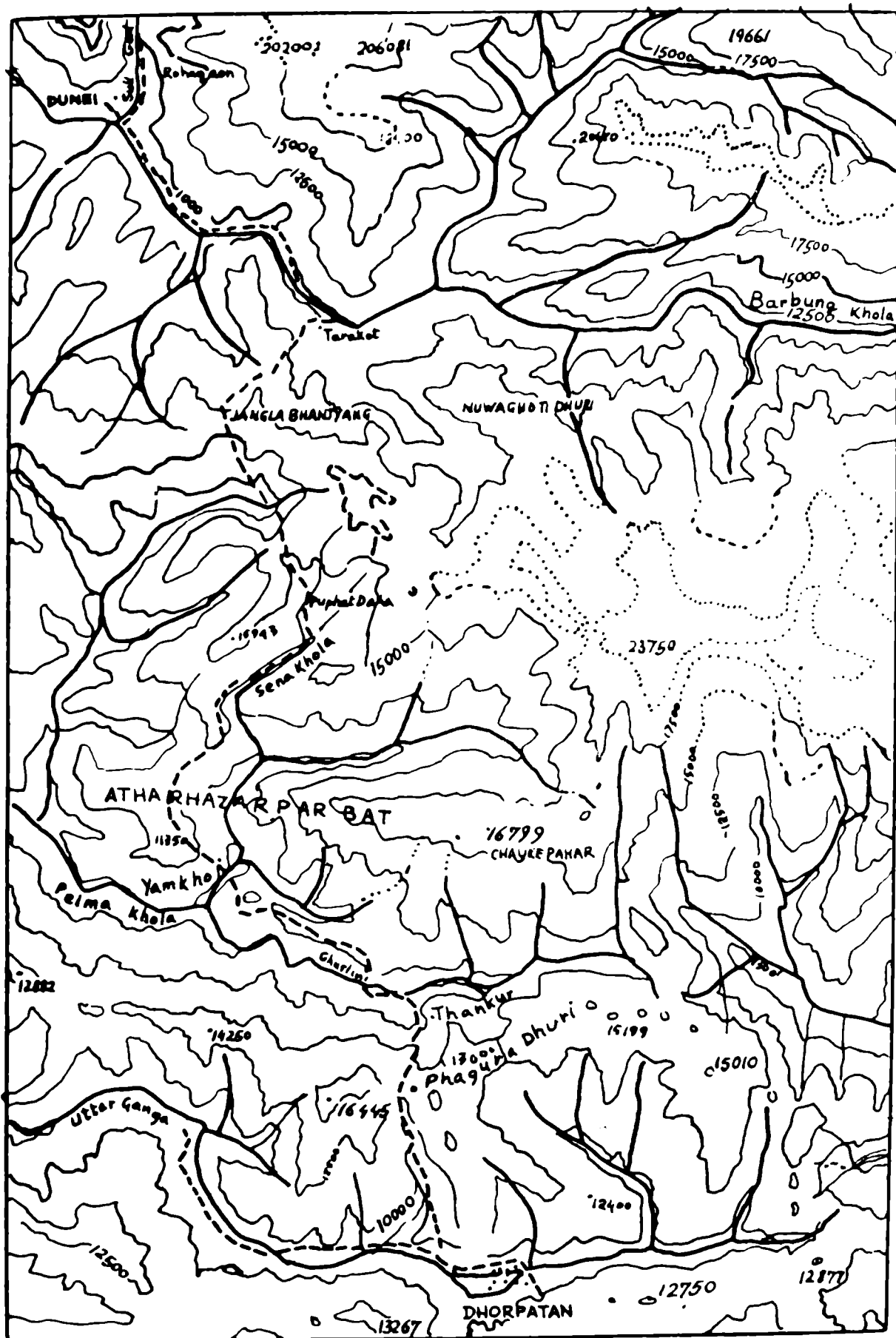
Sharda Prakashan Griha

Post box No. 1261

Kathmandu Nepal

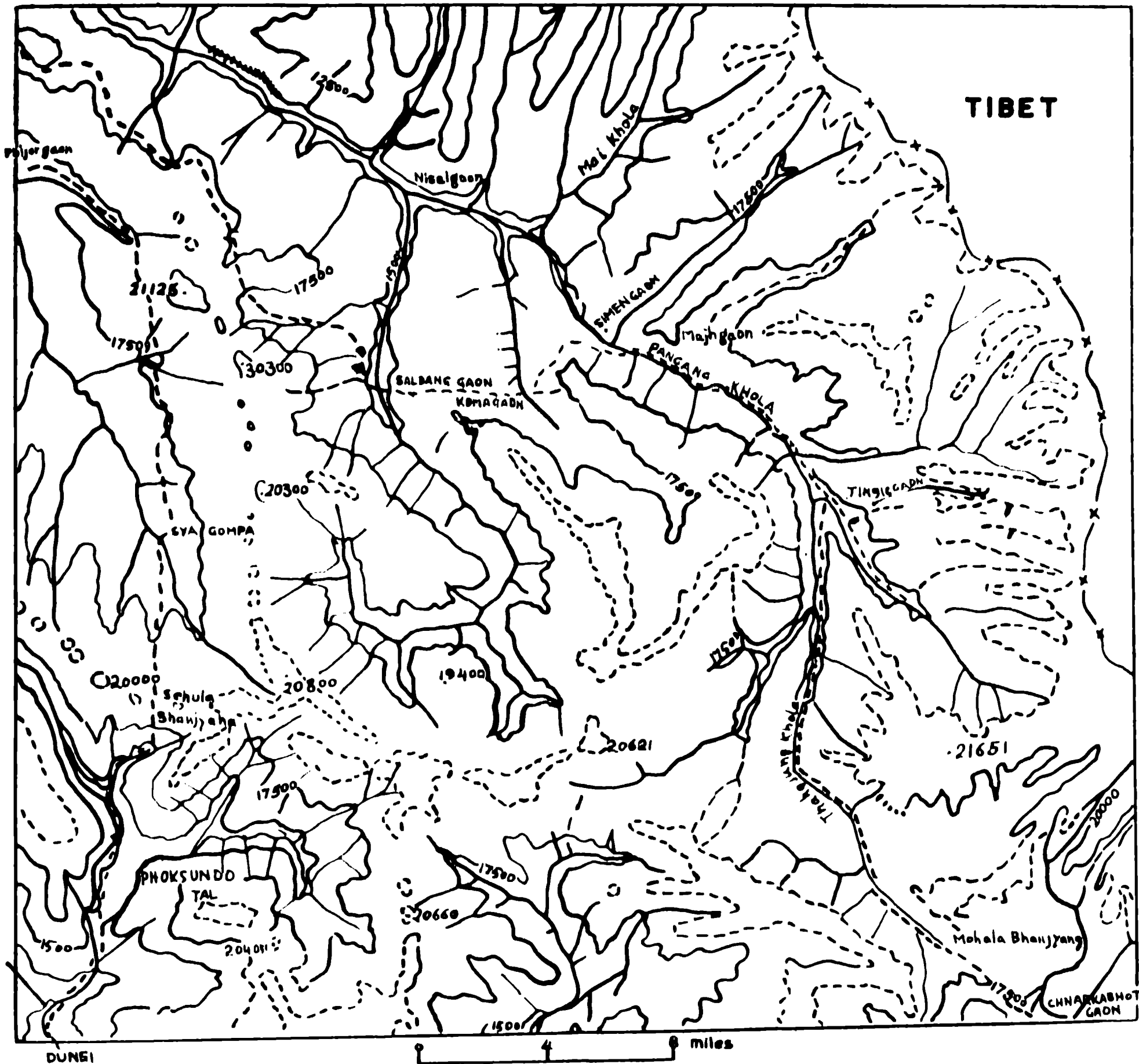
Telephones: 13-346, 11-278, 13-746

DHORPATAN TO DUNEI



CONTOUR INTERVAL 2500 FEET

DUNEI TO CHHARKABHOT GAON



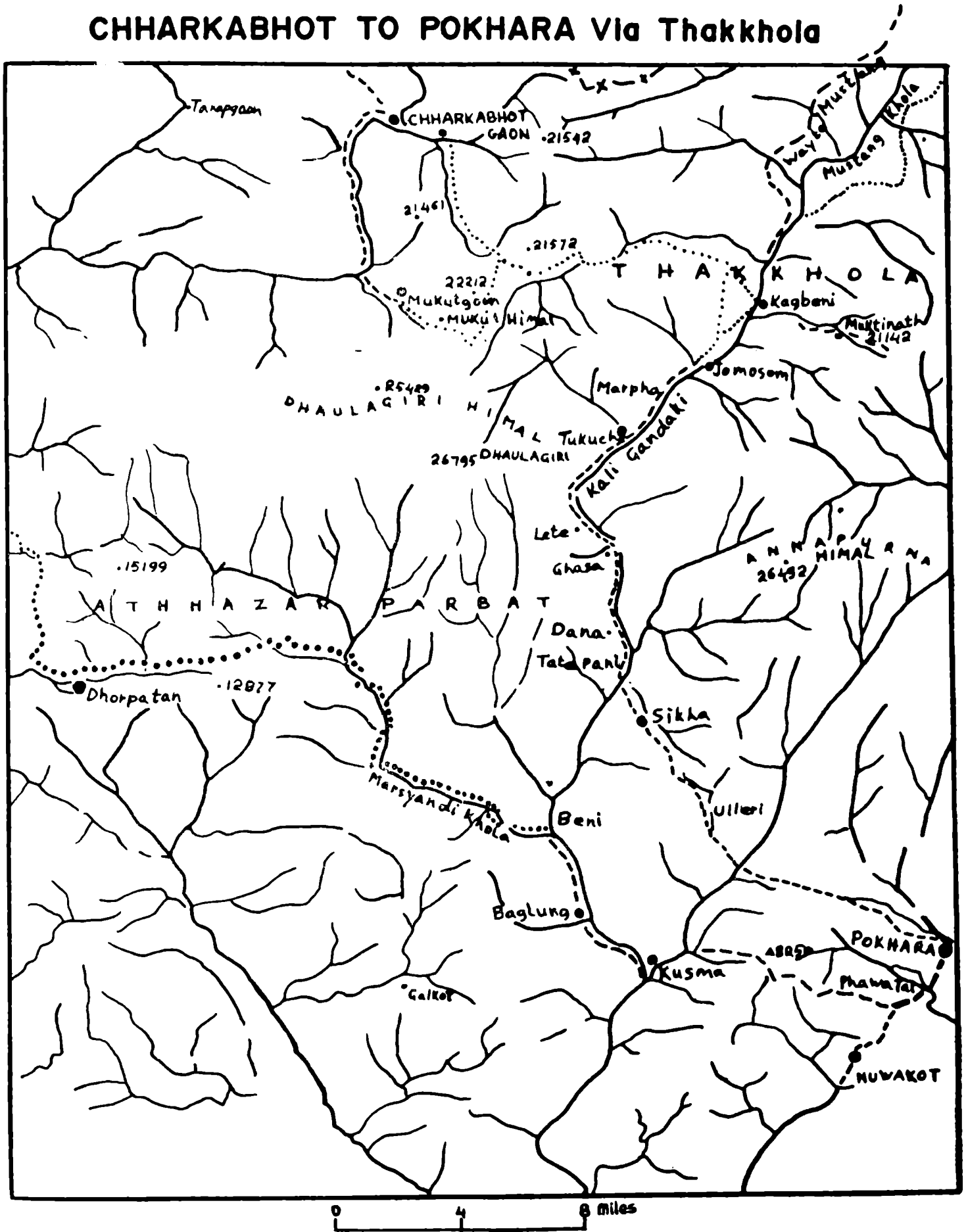
TIBET

DUNEI

miles

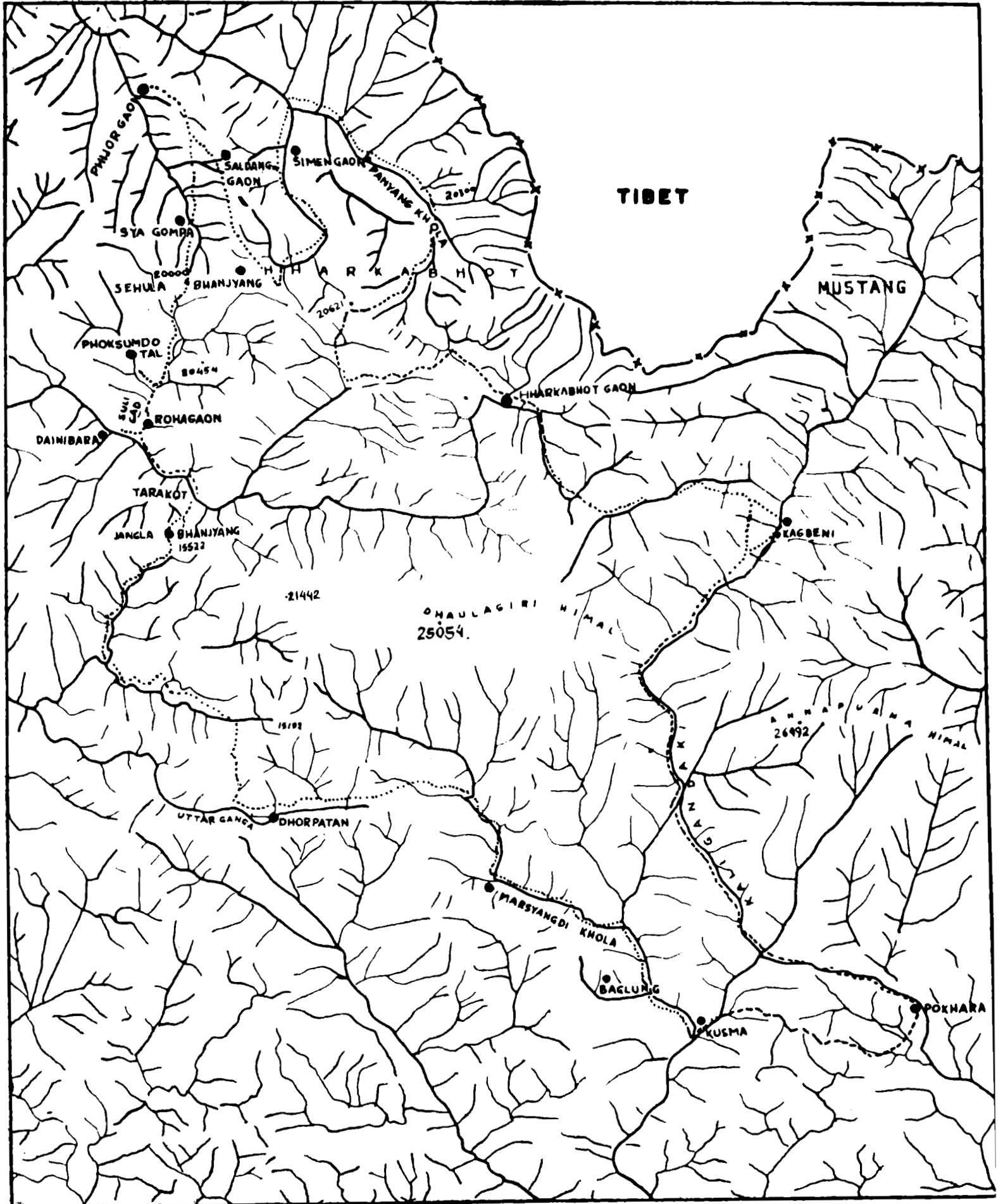
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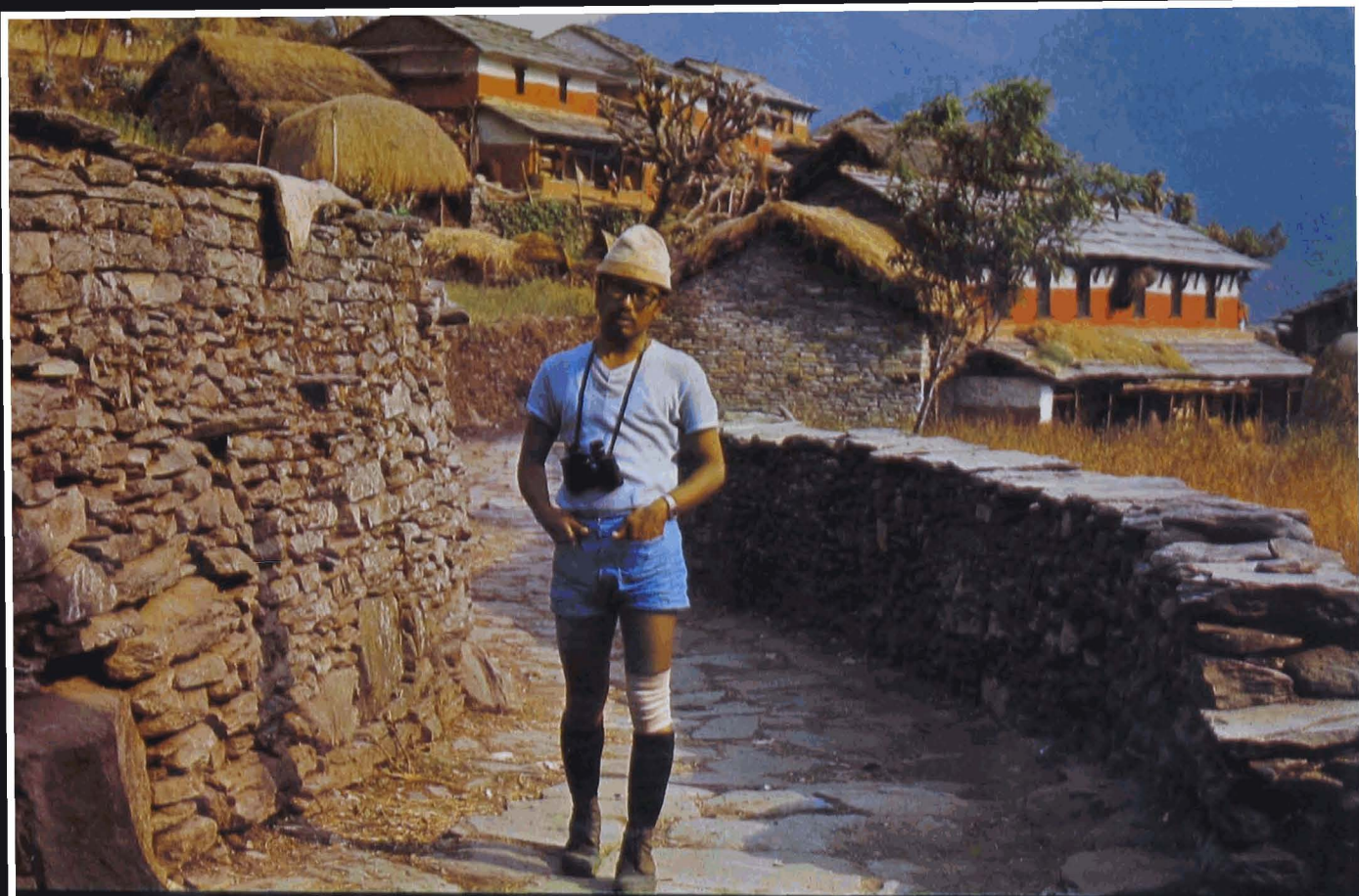
CHHARKABHOT TO POKHARA Via Thakkhola



COMPLETE ROUTE MAP

0 9 16 Miles





Karna Sakya was born on 30th March 1943 in Kathmandu. He did his post-graduate diploma in Forestry from Deheradun (India) in 1967, and then took further training in Forestry and National Parks and Equivalent Reserves in Australia, USA and Canada. He worked for H.M.G. of Nepal as a wild-life officer and was partly responsible for the establishment of Nepal's first two national parks—Chitwan and Langtang. He is one of the few Nepali foresters to have travelled so extensively all over the Himalayan region for wild-life and nature studies. He resigned from the Forestry Service of H.M.G. and entered tourist based industries. He is the main driving force behind the creation of House of Kathmandu in Brisbane, where he lectures regularly on different subjects of Nepal, helping to introduce Nepal to Queensland, Australia. At present he is the General Secretary of the Nepal Nature Conservation Society and frequently publishes articles on nature conservation.